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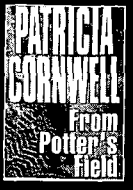

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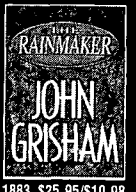

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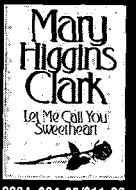

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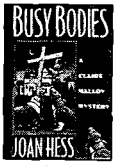

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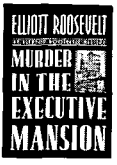

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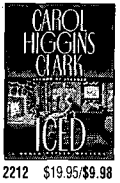

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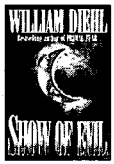

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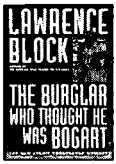

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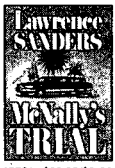

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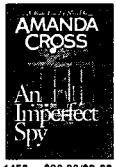

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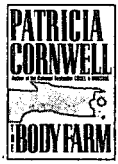

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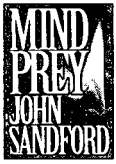

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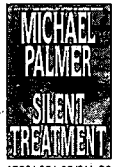

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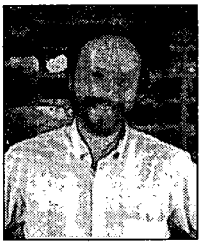

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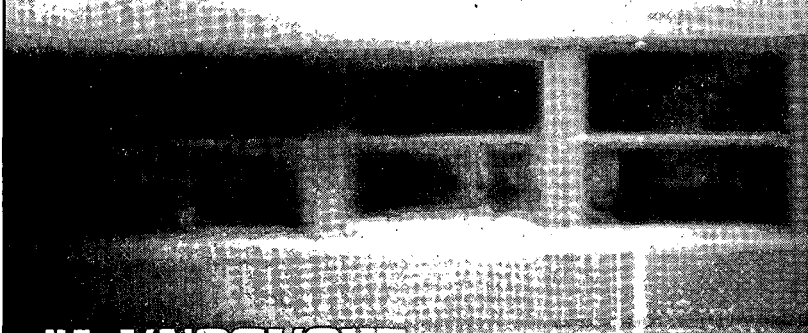

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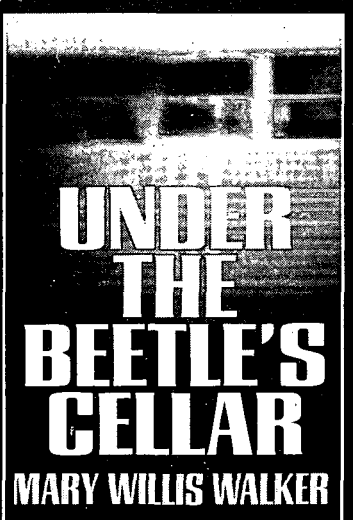

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In All Honesty

by Ruth Rendell

Ever since Beatrix Cooper-Gibson had had her teeth capped she had been afraid of one or more of the crowns coming adrift while she was asleep, sticking in her throat, and choking her to death. It was in vain that her dentist told her this could never happen. Caps did loosen, it was a well-known fact, so why not hers? And why not in the night?

The result was that she became a bad sleeper. Always supposing she could get to sleep, she woke up after an hour or so and felt about in her mouth to make sure the caps were all still there. It took awhile to get to sleep again and then she was bound to wake up after another hour and begin the exploratory process once more.

As she grew older so her fears increased, for there were others. If she sat close to a wall she was afraid a picture might fall on her, even if she sat six inches away, a foot away, for there was

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no guarantee it would not fly outwards in its descent. Gradually she had all the furniture moved into the center of the rooms. Flies were anathema to her, and since spiders catch flies, she allowed no spiders' webs to be removed. She was more frightened of electricity than almost anything, expected every plug to be pulled out of every socket before the household retired for the night and pulled out the plug on her bed lamp herself. This meant that if she wanted light in the night she would have to get up first to replace the plug in the socket, so she kept a torch on the bedside cabinet and a candle in a candlestick in case the torch battery failed.

Last year Ruth Rendell celebrated her thirtieth anniversary as a mystery novelist; in those three decades she produced thirty-nine novels and five short-story collections—work of profound psychological insight and keen-edged suspense. Ms. Rendell's first short stories were written at the suggestion of *EQMM*'s previous editor Eleanor Sullivan and have earned her two short-story Edgars.

Unsympathetic companions might have made her life very difficult or unhappy (or cured her of these neurotic compulsions) but Gwenda and Clive thought these anxieties only reasonable. Or Gwenda did, and Clive went along with what Gwenda thought, as she went along with what he thought, for their marriage was exceptionally harmonious. Gwenda thought Beatrix Cooper-Gibson a sensible, prudent woman.

"The house hasn't burnt down, has it?" Gwenda said. "And in all honesty—" she used this expression a lot, often when neither truth nor probity were in question—"no one's ever been hit on the head by a picture."

"And say what you like," said loyal Clive, "food poisoning has never been an issue."

These arguments had been occasioned by Beatrix Cooper-Gibson's son Alexander protesting about what he called his mother's "barminess." She was getting worse, he said. She was seventy-five, would probably live another ten years, and what further eccentricities would she develop before that?

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It was in Gwenda and Clive's interest to keep Beatrix alive as long as possible. Eighty-five was nothing. Why not ninety-five, when they would be eligible for their own retirement pensions? The job was a sinecure, lovely flat, colour TV and video, bathroom with Jacuzzi, personal microwave, and if Beatrix insisted that they too moved the furniture into the middle of each room, that was no hardship. It signified her care and affection for them, a tenderness both returned. She didn't need much looking after, bless her, fit as a fiddle she was, wonderful for her age.

"In all honesty," Gwenda said, "it's like having one's own dear mother in one's home."

If Alexander minded that—after all, they were in Beatrix's house, not she in theirs—he gave no sign of it. He pointed out that the place had been completely rewired two years before and that his mother's dentist had assured him the cement he used to fix her caps in place would take a pulling power of five hundred horsepower to shift it.

"Accidents do happen," said Clive, a remark which earned him an encouraging smile from his wife.

Alexander cast up his eyes. His mother's latest whim was to have the whole house refitted with a deep shag pile carpet in various pale shades. She had read somewhere or heard (or invented, Alexander thought) that whereas close carpet in a dark colour absorbs heat and even a certain amount of light, pale shag with inch-long fibres traps warmth and then reflects it back. It was dreadful to think, she said, of all that expensive heat being sucked up by the thin dark surface, leaving the rooms cold and probably even damp, encouraging colds, flu, bronchitis, allergies, pneumonia, catarrh, pleurisy, and hypothermia. She painted a grim picture of a dark greenish-brown tight-woven mass, fungoid or swamplike, drawing into itself, as might a carnivorous plant draw in insects, all the health-giving warmth from the central heating and radiant light from the sun.

"It will cost a bomb," said Alexander.

"So what? I'm not asking you to pay for it."

He would scarcely have minded if she had. Money was not at issue. He had as much of it as she had, and if he had made his while his father had left her hers, it was all money to be spent as money should be, on an enhancement of the quality of life.

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But to blow it on hideous anaemic floor covering, having ripped up acres of prime Wilton . . . !

"I'm going to have it done, Alexander. I can't sleep at night for worrying about it. I lie awake thinking about all that heat draining through the floors."

"Better take the doctor's sleeping pills," said Alexander.

"Oh yes, definitely," said his mother with heavy sarcasm, "and get such a good night's sleep I choke to death on my own teeth."

The carpet fitters came in a month later and removed the chocolate and olive-green and crimson Wilton from the floors. Beatrix told them it had absorbed not only ten years of heat but also billions upon billions of microbes, and to take it away and dispose of it. The foreman took it home, had it cleaned, and relaid it all over his housing association duplex.

The shrimp-pink and albino and mouse and meal-coloured shag was unrolled. Beatrix measured the strands in the pile with a ruler and found them an acceptable inch-and-a-half long. The foreman called it four centimetres but she wasn't having any truck with that. It took days to lay the carpet in every room of the house, Beatrix often hindering operations by reminding the workmen not to move the furniture too close to the walls and not to touch the spiders' webs.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" said Gwen, clapping her hands. "Don't you love those delicate pastel shades?" Alexander said it wasn't exactly to his taste and his sister Julia said it would be a lot harder to keep clean.

"In all honesty," said Gwenda, "and if you don't mind me saying so, that's my problem. To be frank, I encouraged Mrs. C-G to have this lovely wall-to-wall and I'm not a bit sorry I did. Light and bright is what you need when you're young in heart if not in years."

Alexander might have said no more, for the deed was done now, and if the new carpet was more suited to high-tech or Bauhaus furniture, to walls of glass and ceilings of marble, than to his mother's early-Victorian chaise longues, family portraits, and watercolours, it was her house and her choice. But Julia was less able to contain her feelings. It was because of this failure of self-control that she came to see Beatrix less often than he did.

"I'm sorry, but I think it's totally ghastly and utterly unsuitable." Julia was a bit of a snob. "It's actually the kind of thing the working classes have in council flats." The foreman had, and

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had rectified this as soon as something superior was available. "I'm sorry, but it's simply not fair on this lovely old house."

Gwenda had not liked that reference to the working class, to which she belonged. She "had no time," in her own phrase, expressed only to Clive, for "Little Miss Clever." But she stood, as she always did when "the family" were all together, in a submissive and perfect servantlike fashion, with her hands clasped and her head bowed. A small gentle and resigned smile tip-tilted her lips and her eyes roved appreciatively across the shag pile carpet, which in this room was the colour of frosted cornflakes. She did not look at Beatrix. There was no need to. She knew Beatrix was not a woman to receive criticism meekly or reproaches with a shrug.

"What did you say?" was how Beatrix began her counter-attack.

"Oh, Mamma, you heard me. You know what I said."

"I know you were setting yourself up as an arbiter of taste and an expert on social distinctions." Beatrix smiled, showing off the well-anchored caps. She was not one to pull her punches. "Considering that suburban eyesore you live in with that bank clerk, I'm sure you're qualified to judge."

"Bertie is not a bank clerk, he is a departmental manager," said Julia.

"Who cares? The only thing about him that interests me is why such a boring and conventional man can't bring himself to do the traditional thing and marry you."

"You shut up, you evil-tongued old bat!"

"Excuse me," said Gwenda. "I'm intruding. I'll go, I have things to see to."

"Stay exactly where you are, Gwenda. A witness to this behaviour is required. Are you going to stand there, Alexander, and let your sister speak to me like that?"

"If you don't like the way I am," said Julia, "you've only yourself to blame. You're my mother."

"Yes, indeed, and giving birth to you was the biggest mistake I ever made. The most miserable day of my life! Now you can apologise. I never want to hear language like that again in my own drawing room. I wonder how you'll feel after I'm gone and you find I've left this 'lovely old house' to somebody else."

This was standard. Beatrix threatened to change her will every time Julia paid a visit. So far she had not done so and Julia

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had never apologised or changed her habit of speaking, but simply walked out of the house muttering, to return two or three months later as if nothing had happened. This time was no different and perhaps would have had no different results if Julia had not come back with Alexander after a week had gone by.

Gwenda admitted them to the house. Letting her son have a key was not the kind of thing that suited Beatrix. The expression on Gwenda's face betrayed her feelings, astonishment at "Miss Clever's" swift return and perhaps a happy anticipation of renewed strife. Beatrix ignored her daughter. She addressed herself to Alexander, telling him of a new danger. This was from toxic rays emanating from the video recorder if tapes were reused more than ten times. Ten was the crucial number. At this point chemical changes took place not in the tape itself but in the black plastic cassette which contained it, and an invisible but noxious ray, or rather gas, was emitted via the medium of the television screen. She had sent Clive out to replace all the video cassettes and burn the old ones.

Alexander said it seemed very far-fetched. His sister curled back her upper lip the way people do when they smell something nasty. She said, though not referring to the poisonous videotapes, that she had been speaking about Beatrix's neuroses (her word) to a friend of hers who was a distinguished physicist. This woman had told her it was all nonsense about dark carpets absorbing heat, a complete myth.

"Women shouldn't be physicists," said Beatrix. "They should stay at home and look after the children. I blame the mess the world is in on women working."

"She hasn't got any children."

"I'm not surprised. Her reproductive processes have been poisoned by the work she does. Or pretends to do."

"To hear you talk," said Julia, "anyone would think you'd had a dozen children instead of stopping at just the two. What happened to your reproductive processes? Or were you too selfish to have any more?"

"I'll just pop out into the kitchen and see to my casserole," said Gwenda, though making no move to go.

"Stay right where you are, please," said Beatrix. "This is it. She has done it this time. Have you ever in all your experience, Gwenda, heard a young woman utter such words to her mother?"

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"Oh, leave me out of it, Mrs. C-G. I'm only a servant. I wouldn't wish to pass judgment."

"Your very tone gives you away, Gwenda. I can hear your loyalty in it. I can hear your natural deep disapproval." Beatrix had an extraordinarily loud voice for a woman of seventy-five. She raised it to its maximum decibels. "Get out of my house!"

"If I go," said Julia, "I won't come back."

"I sincerely hope not. It would give me a little holiday in my heart to have seen the last of you. I'll see *you* on Tuesday, Alexander."

And she did. But by that time she had changed her will. Gwenda brought her the mobile phone, she called Mr. Webley and asked him to lunch. He came on the Monday. Clive, who did the cooking when there was company, made *mozzarella tricolóre,* chicken à la king, and charlotte russe, for both Beatrix and her solicitor were fond of their food. While they were drinking their coffee, and Beatrix, but not Mr. Webley for he had to drive, was having a Drambuie with it, he took his pad out of his briefcase and noted down his client's wishes: not a sausage (her words) to Julia, a token sum to Alexander, and everything else to Clive and Gwenda.

Mr. Webley remonstrated gently.

"When you've quite finished," said Beatrix, "perhaps you'll remember it's my money."

The will was drawn up and sent to Beatrix for her approval. This was not the first time this had happened, though in the past there had been different sets of beneficiaries and always the new will had been torn up or, at any rate, not returned to Mr. Webley. The old one, the one that left everything to Alexander and Julia, remained valid. But this time Beatrix had meant what she said. She read the will carefully, and when Gwenda came into the room told her she wanted two witnesses.

"Clive and me will be happy to do that for you," said Gwenda untruthfully. She was on tenterhooks.

Beatrix gave her a long, meaningful look. "That wouldn't do at all," she said. "Perhaps you'll just step across the road and ask Lady Huntly if she would be so kind as to come over for a glass of sherry. Oh, and Gwenda, if Brian is still doing the yew hedge he might come in too. Make sure he washes his hands first."

Lady Huntly was the widow of a county councillor and Lord

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Lieutenant who had been knighted for giving large sums of money to the Conservative Party. She was a sprightly little old lady with bright red lips and a wig of blue curls. Sizable sums of money remained, enabling her to live in the big Edwardian turreted house opposite, keep up the BMW, and spend part of every winter in Fort Lauderdale. Her principal recreation was ballroom dancing, which she indulged in three times a week at teatime, partnered by an old man who had been her boyfriend before she met the county councillor. Beatrix liked her because she listened sympathetically to her anxieties and to some extent shared her fears about toxic videotapes and swallowing one's teeth, in Lady Huntly's case a plate.

The gardener, Brian Gospel, was a singer with a country-and-western band, his real name being Gobbett. He mowed Beatrix's lawn and trimmed her hedges between gigs. Julia said her mother should be careful, and she hoped she was insured to cover all eventualities because Brian had chorea, you only had to see his tics, and was certainly unsafe around the electric trimmer. She refused to believe Beatrix when she said he was only miming an armpit guitar. He was twenty-three years old, tall, dark, and ugly in a sexy sort of way.

These were the two people Gwenda brought in to witness Beatrix's will.

"In the presence of the testatrix and of each other," said Gwenda, who had read these instructions in a pamphlet from the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

She still thought Beatrix might change her mind. She stood there with her arms folded and her head bowed, holding her breath. Beatrix signed. Lady Huntly signed, using her own Mont Blanc fountain pen. Brian signed and said he didn't suppose the ladies would fancy coming along to an evening of nostalgia and sing along with Merle Haggard's greatest hits. Fluttering her extended eyelashes, Lady Huntly said she would think about it, and after Brian had gone back to his hedge, she and Beatrix settled down to schooners of oleroso.

Jubilant in the kitchen, Gwenda said to Clive that they had done it this time. She would take the will to the post and catch the five-thirty collection.

"Or I could drive into town and drop it through Webley's letterbox."

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"We don't want to do anything to draw attention to ourselves," said Gwenda. She put her arms round him, gave him a passionate kiss, and then she took the will down the road, dropping it in the letterbox at ten past five.

But the next morning she wished she had let Clive do as he suggested. She had never felt so nervous. Suppose there had been a mail robbery? Such things happened. Or a wicked postman, with no idea of his duty to the post office and the public, had stolen a selection of the contents of the box in the hope of discovering five-pound notes slipped into letters? She resisted for two hours and then she phoned Mr. Webley. Mrs. Cooper-Gibson, she said, was very anxious to know if the will had arrived. Oh yes, certainly, he had it in his hand at that moment, said Mr. Webley, sounding none too pleased and rather suspicious.

Gwenda wished she hadn't done it. What would happen if he told Beatrix? A new will? Oh, the shame and the pain! Alexander came in the afternoon and talked for a long time in a maudlin way about how much he wished his mother and sister got on better. He implied that it was largely his mother's fault. Had she thought of seeing a psychotherapist, or perhaps a counsellor? Beatrix told him to go, she was tired, she disliked being lectured in her own house. Coming back from virtually pushing him out of the front door, she leaned back against the wall and stamped her foot. She stamped one heavily shod solid foot and then the other, and a large oil painting in a gilt frame fell off the wall and struck her on the neck and back.

Her worst misgivings were realised. Beatrix yelled for Gwenda. She wasn't much hurt, but she was frightened. Her fears had been real and yet they had not been real, they were of the kind that wake the sufferer with vague apprehensions during the night but are not much more than an eccentricity by day, superstitious injunctions that if not obeyed may result in disaster, so why not obey them? But this had proved them right, proved *her* right. Gwenda offered to call the doctor.

"I don't want him," said Beatrix. At their last encounter she had overheard him telling Gwenda her troubles were "in the old soul's imagination."

"Well, shall I have a look at your back, Mrs. C-G?"

"No, leave me alone. Now this has happened, I shan't sleep a wink. Or if I do, I shall relive the nightmare of that picture falling on me."

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The picture, a portrait of Beatrix's grandfather in a morning coat with some sort of chain of office hanging round his neck, was examined by Clive who found its cord badly frayed. There must have been thirty or forty pictures of equal size and weight—if not all of such unattractive subjects—in the house, and Beatrix said she would be unable to sleep ever again until she knew all the cords had been replaced. Clive set about it straightaway, although it was half-past nine in the evening.

Beatrix said, "I may be doing a very imprudent thing, Gwenda, but I am going to take a sleeping pill."

"Quite right," said Gwenda. "After all, the odds against your caps coming off and sticking in your throat must be about ten thousand to one."

"I wouldn't know about that. I'm not a bookmaker. As a matter of fact I would normally consider the chances quite high, as you know, only not now the picture has fallen on me."

"Pardon?"

"Lightning isn't going to strike twice, is it? It's not in the nature of things for a picture to fall on me and then for my teeth to get stuck in my throat. You might as well say that tonight I'm just as much in danger as ever of being burnt to death by faulty electricity, when obviously I'm not."

"If you say so," said Gwenda doubtfully, and she found the sleeping pills and brought one to Beatrix with her hot drink.

By eleven-fifteen Clive had renewed the cords on twenty-two pictures. "I shall call it a day," he said to his wife. "Enough is enough."

"You'll check up on the electric plugs, won't you?"

Clive did. He went into his own flat and to bed just before midnight. Gwenda put her arms round him in her sleep. On the floor below, at the front of the house, in the big master bedroom newly fitted in shell-pink shag, Beatrix lay perilously near the edge of the bed. The drug had a powerful effect on her because in all her life she had only taken a soporific twice before. Still and totally relaxed, she lay as one dead. But some imperceptible movements must have occurred in her deep sleep, for an acute observer, if there had been one, who had watched her for the past hour would have noticed that from the center of the four-poster she had shifted in that time some six inches towards the edge. By half-past midnight her gradual forward progress had

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increased the distance to nine inches. At one-fifteen she was poised on the very edge.

The bedclothes were not tucked in. They never were. Beatrix had another phobia about that. She insisted that an inevitable result of tucking in the bedclothes was a nightmare in which she was sewn up in a sack with a snake and a monkey and thrown in the Bosphorus. So the sheet and blanket hung loose, while the quilt had slithered back to the far side of the bed. Beatrix's left arm hung over the edge. Her left leg dipped over the edge and slowly her right leg joined it. Although she was fast asleep, she waved her right arm to save herself, but nevertheless slipped forward and tumbled onto the floor.

Beatrix lay prone with her face buried in the soft long-haired pink carpet. If her progress across the bed had been backwards she would have fallen into a supine position and very likely have recovered. But, still deeply asleep, she lay face-down with thick fluff pressing into her nose and mouth and it suffocated her. Within half an hour she was dead. The time was just before two.

Entering the bedroom at nine, Gwenda called out her usual merry "Good morning, Mrs. C-G," a cry which turned to a shreik of terror. Her first thought was that the most-feared had happened and Beatrix had swallowed the caps off her teeth. She told the doctor that and he reacted to what she said with suspicion, not to say indignation. By then he had seen the bruise on the back of Beatrix's neck.

The pathologist the police called in found more bruises on Beatrix's back. Gwenda was questioned. She told the detective inspector about the picture falling on Beatrix, adding that the cord holding it in place had become frayed. When no signs of fraying could be seen, Clive described how he had renewed the cord not only on the portrait of Beatrix's grandfather but on twenty-one other paintings in the house. The inspector seemed to find this very odd, especially as Alexander told him he knew nothing about a picture falling on his mother. The fear of such a thing happening was a factor in her neurosis, bearing no relation to reality.

Suspicion increased when the contents of the will were made known. The will itself was dated only two days before. Its provisions were that everything Beatrix had to leave, her house, her investments, as well as a huge capital sum, went to Clive and

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Gwenda. The inquest on Beatrix was adjourned while the police continued to make enquiries.

Lady Huntly told the inspector that she had been greatly surprised to be called as a witness to the will. Gwenda had rushed across the road with unseemly haste as if it were a matter of life or death. No doubt it was. Of course she had been able to see which way the wind was blowing as soon as she understood neither Clive nor Gwenda was to be the other witness. The inspector talked to Brian and Brian told him he had never been inside the house before and would have refused to have anything to do with this will business had not Gwenda implored him to "do this one little thing for her before the old trout changed her mind."

Mr. Webley described how astonished he had been to receive a phone call from Gwenda not five minutes after the will had come in the post. He had scarcely taken it out of its envelope. Mrs. Cooper-Gibson had often in the past talked of changing her will and the process had frequently gone as far as a draft will being drawn up or even a will itself sent to her for signature, but in these cases things had gone no further.

Julia intended to contest the will. Or she said she did. That shag carpet had been fitted on Gwenda's advice, she told the inspector. Her mother would never have got rid of her Wilton but for Gwenda and Clive, who had gained an unhealthy hold over Beatrix. It was easy to imagine those two persuading Beatrix to break the rule of a lifetime, take a sleeping pill, and while she was unconscious, roll her off the bed onto the floor and suffocate her by pressing her face into the carpet. The bruises were evidence of manhandling—what more did the police want?

Day after day Gwenda and Clive were questioned, sometimes at home, more often at the police station. They remained in Beatrix's house, *their* house now. Their flat was repeatedly searched and scrutinised, their possessions tested and photographed and surface-scraped, examined for pink fibres that might have found their way from the floor of Beatrix's bedroom into theirs. No one ever told them whether or not such fibres had been found. They had begun to be uneasy with each other, more polite and considerate than usual, but with less to say.

Julia phoned or wrote letters to the police every day, quoting remarks Gwenda was alleged to have made on the state of Bea-

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trix's health, the extent of her income, and the likelihood of her accidental death. After she had written thirty-five such letters, she had a nervous breakdown, retired to a psychiatric hospital, and gave up contesting the will.

Alexander got married. He had never fancied the idea of his mother and any wife of his in conjunction.

Sometimes Clive spent the night in a cell at the police station—they were getting used to him there, put a drop of whisky in his nighttime cocoa and gave him an extra blanket—but the law restrained them from holding him for more than twenty-four hours. Gwenda they often reduced to tears by asking her why she didn't confess and so save them all a lot of time and expense.

"We shall never give this up," said the detective inspector, "not if it takes us twenty years."

Lady Huntly refused to speak to Gwenda and Clive. She and her dancing partner ignored them pointedly, walking past with their noses in the air. All the neighbors followed suit. Mr. Webley dined out on the tale of how he had been served *mozzarella tricolóre,* chicken a la king, and charlotte russe by the notorious carpet murderers.

This went on for about a year. Gwenda and Clive gave up sharing a bed. Gwenda said she couldn't sleep when the person beside her had such awful dreams, waking up with a yell two or three times in the night. Your own dreams aren't in the best of taste, Clive said, moving into the spare room.

Brian went to Nashville with the band. It was a package tour and included Graceland and Disney World, but of course they hoped to be talent-spotted. While in the United States he read a piece in a newspaper that he thought worth bringing home for the police. It told of a wealthy Texan widow from Beach City who had died through suffocation. She too had fallen out of bed and smothered in the shag pile carpeting. "After a ten-month investigation," said the newspaper, "her death has been ruled due to a freak accident."

The inquest on Beatrix was reopened and a verdict of accidental death returned.

The neighbours continued to ignore Gwenda and Clive. Alexander's wife had a baby. Julia came out of hospital and wrote a long letter to Gwenda, apologising for her insinuations and suggesting she take on, at a peppercorn rent, the flat which used

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to be theirs. Bertie the bank departmental manager had left her and gone to Hong Kong. Mr. Webley's partner warned him that the stories he was spreading of poisoned charlotte russe and stomach upsets after every visit he had paid to Beatrix's house might well constitute slander.

Clive and Gwenda sold the house and moved away. They also sold most of the furniture, but Clive held on to the portrait of Beatrix's grandfather in morning coat and chain of office as a keepsake. Gwenda kept the video recorder to remind her of happier days when they had been a couple, sharing their home with a woman who had been as good as a mother to them. For they were no longer together. Their marriage, for a quarter of a century so happy, had broken up.

"In all honesty," said Gwenda, for once using the phrase correctly, "did you kill her?"

"You know I didn't," said Clive. "I was asleep in bed with you. You were asleep in bed with me." He thought about that one. "Or were you?"

"You know I was, Clive."

"You were just as capable of killing her as me."

"But I didn't."

"You would say that," said Clive.

"So would you."

Clive bought a seven-roomed bungalow in the Isle of Wight, Gwenda a seventeenth-century farmhouse in Shropshire. Their notoriety travelled before them and they were rejected by the local inhabitants. Still, as Gwenda wrote, replying to Julia's Christmas card, there was something to be said, in all honesty, for being unhappy in luxury. ●

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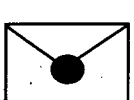

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Poetry Contest $24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes in coming months

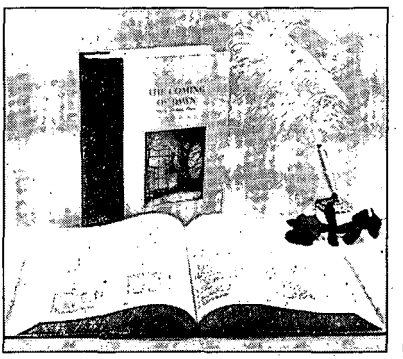
Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem, any subject, any style to:

The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
PO Box 704-6122
Owings Mills, MD 21117



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of NLP's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

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LADY ANNE'S FRIEND

by David Dean

A native of Columbus, Georgia, David Dean sets almost all his stories in the Northeast, where he has worked as a policeman for many years. The author of a good police story should know the ropes of a real police department. David Dean knows not only procedures, but the psychology of the men in blue, and that's why his work is fascinating even when he's writing about cops off duty, as in this new story.

The kitchen of their little ranch house was darkening as Julian settled himself at the counter and watched Anne move efficiently through the rituals of making dinner. From the back of the house he could hear the voices of Ina and Conner raised in debate on some, no doubt, compelling issue. He gave it two minutes before intervention became necessary. Two more minutes in which to watch Lady Anne.

Ever frugal, Anne switched on only the light over the stove, throwing a soft golden glow over her features. Julian was content to remain at his post in semidarkness. She glanced over at him and favored him with a quick smile mingled with a perplexed look. Julian knew that she was wondering at his silence. With the normally quiet-natured Anne he did most of the talking. Only now he could not trust himself to speak. He wanted only to savor his secret until the right moment. He smiled carefully back and she returned her attention to the task at hand. The children's argument grew louder in the background.

He loved these moments before dinner when he could immerse himself in the warmth of his family. They only came around for one week a month. On the four-to-twelve shift, he was at home when Anne was at work and the kids at school. When they re-

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turned for the day, he had already left for duty. On the midnight shift, like the living dead, he rose in darkness and moved about the house like a phantom, wraithlike and insubstantial, feeling out of synch with the human race. Only on day shift could he play the part of a normal father and husband and pretend that being a cop was a job like any other. In fact, today it was a job better than any other. He choked back the stupid grin he felt spreading across his face and returned to Anne.

"Anne." He spoke hoarsely, waiting for her full attention. She was engrossed in the poppings and cracklings of some stir-fried dish, her slender neck bent over the task. Her delicate head turned towards him, the green eyes distracted. The children's dispute was erupting into civil war. He plowed on.

"Something happened at work today." Her eyes came into focus as the lips settled into a grim line. Something happening was usually not good.

"It seems the chief screwed up and promoted me."

Anne stood there, uncomprehending. The kids burst forth from their room, each vying to be first to present their case against the other.

"Honey, I'm a sergeant now," he clarified.

It was then that he saw the tears standing in her eyes and he came around the counter and held her. The children arrived just in time to be silenced by the spectacle of their mother crying. Julian smiled at them over her shoulder. The Lady Anne was happy.

It took over a year for them to sell their old home, find a new and larger one, finance it, and move in. Julian swore that he would never be involved in another move and, in fact, would be buried in the backyard of Anne's dream house. She happily agreed to this, with the proviso that she would be able to extend her flower garden over the spot and that there would be no gloomy headstone.

It was during this time that Julian noticed the car. He had just gotten home from a midnight shift and was about to pull the curtains of his bedroom when he saw it. A large grey car parked at the end of his street, the driver a motionless shadow behind the wheel. The man appeared to be watching Julian's house.

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Julian continued closing the curtains, being careful to leave a small opening between them. He walked downstairs to retrieve his binoculars. When he returned to the window, the car and driver were gone.

As he undressed for bed, it occurred to him that he had seen the car before . . . somewhere. He lay in the silent house—Anne and the children were at their respective schools—and tried to remember, but only succeeded in falling into an uneasy sleep. In his dreams, the faceless man came to the door and tried to hand him a painted stick with feathers tied to one end. Julian woke up gasping and shouting, his cries echoing through the empty, day-lit house.

It was two weeks later, during day shift, that Julian was summoned to the chief's office. These summonses were as rare as a sight of the chief himself, who managed to enter and exit the police building each day without encountering the men he commanded. Considering that there was but a single entrance for police personnel, this was quite a feat of timing.

Julian checked himself over at the bottom of the stairs to ensure there were no obvious omissions in his uniform, then began his ascent. He had to assume that since the chief had bypassed the captain in his request for him, this was not a disciplinary matter.

He gained the landing and strode past the chief's secretary, who abruptly nodded him through. Julian didn't read anything into this, as she always behaved nervously around the uniformed officers and, like her boss, seemed to avoid them whenever possible.

The chief sat behind his massive desk, awash in paperwork, and waved him in. "Come in, come in!"

He smiled broadly at Julian from across the wasteland of his desk, a place referred to as the "black hole" by the men of the department, indicating its uncanny ability to draw onto its surface requests, requisitions, and suggestions and never yield them up again. "Well . . . well, well, well. How's Julian? Just about through with your probation, aren't you? How have things been going? No problems?"

He paused while Julian pondered which of these questions he was expected to answer.

"Actually, Chief, I finished probation a month ago."

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"Ah . . . yes," was the chief's mock-thoughtful reply. He tended to act the clown when he was nervous and now he put a finger up to his pursed lips. "When did we promote you, anyway? Has it been that long? Damn, time has a way of slipping by, doesn't it?"

Not in some situations, Julian thought ruefully. "Yes sir, it does. You wanted to see me about something?"

The chief glanced uneasily at Julian. "It's nothing to worry about. There's just this letter."

"Letter?" Julian repeated.

"I had it looked into and it's completely unsubstantiated. I knew it was bullshit," he finished with a self-satisfied grin.

"A letter?" Julian repeated, feeling stupid and alarmed.

The chief began to paw through the mounds of paper on his desk. "I guess you want to read it, huh? Well, if I can find it, you can!" He laughed aloud at this.

Julian almost stood to help him, and when the chief came up waving it in the air, Julian almost snatched it from his hand. Then, composing himself, he began to examine the envelope, working from the outside in, forcing himself to slow down and be methodical. The chief, not smiling now, watched.

It was an ordinary white envelope, the paper worn and soiled by much handling. The stamp was recent and common. The postmark, barely legible, was two months old and indicated that it had been mailed from a town in New York state. Julian did not recognize the name of the village, but the name of the sender, Sean Molly, rushed at him, grabbing him by the throat and choking off his air. Blood began to pound and roar in his ears. He knew, or more correctly, knew of, Sean Molly.

The familiar writing on the outside was large and shaky, done in block letters. Julian carefully withdrew the single ragged sheet of lined writing paper from the envelope and unfolded it. There was no heading or date. It was brief and to the point. Julian's hands were shaking by the time he finished.

It was a plea to save Anne from her husband, Julian Hall. Julian was vilified as a drug dealer, wife abuser, and . . . worse. The writer also alleged that Julian allowed others of his kind to abuse Anne; in fact, encouraged it. It made him sick to have Anne mentioned in such a context. Did the writer actually believe this trash? He sounded so sincere, even desperate for Anne's well-being.

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Then, in the final paragraph, the writer's apparent concern veered into what was clearly fantasy, even to the unschooled eye. He accused Julian of storing large amounts of plutonium in their home. Julian felt the room growing darker around him. He's mad, he thought.

The writer had learned of Anne's predicament through a phone call, he claimed. A call Anne made out of desperation and in secrecy, fearing for her life. He lent credence to his allegations by stating that he and Anne had attended the same high school and grown up in the same town in north Jersey. He closed by giving the Halls' address and pleading for immediate action.

Julian looked up at the chief, who looked very uncomfortable. Naturally, he had read it too.

"Why wait two months, Chief?"

"Two months? . . . Oh! You mean since we got the letter. We didn't see the point of upsetting you, if it was all unfounded. The detectives had to make a few calls to get to the bottom of it. Seems this fellow is some nut living in a religious community in upstate New York. We spoke with the local constable and he says this Molly character showed up six months ago and is a real loony! This particular area has a number of communes of one kind or another and he's got more nutcases wandering around than Carter's got pills!" He guffawed.

"So, I'm cleared then?" Julian asked quietly.

"You were never under suspicion! We have to check out any and all allegations against our officers. It's for your own good. We wouldn't want any half-baked rumors floatin' around."

Julian took a deep breath and replied in a calm and offhand manner. "You're right, Chief. I understand. I take it we haven't heard anything further from Mr. Molly since his letter?"

The chief smiled, relief showing on his face. "Not a thing. I doubt we'll hear from him again. It was a fluke. He picked your name out of the phone book or something. He's probably forgotten all about you by now. Like you said, it's been two months."

"Yeah, probably. You mind if I keep this letter and have a copy of the detectives' report? Just in case he starts up again."

The chief looked uncertain for a moment. "Well, I guess that would be okay. Get copies from my secretary on your way out."

Julian took his cue and rose on unsteady legs. He managed a smile at the chief and walked to the door clutching the envelope.

"By the way," he said when he reached the door, "since this is a closed case and there's no harm in knowing, have you had a car watching my place?"

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Indignant, the chief fired a reply at him. "Hell, no! If I had really thought there was anything to these charges, you would have been offered a polygraph by now!"

"Thanks, Chief."

"And get that plutonium out of your house!" the chief called out as Julian stepped into the hall.

Julian ignored the speed limit on the way home, something he was normally very conscientious about, especially in uniform. Today he didn't care. He just wanted to see Anne and the children, to be where he could watch over them. He knew two things that the chief did not, and they filled him with a sense of helpless anquish and fury. If the department had not been having him watched, then presumably, the man in the car had been Sean Molly. A Sean Molly who had not found their address in the phone book, as the chief assumed, their number having been unlisted since their move to the new house, but through someone they both knew. Maybe one of Anne's unwitting high-school classmates. The chief had assumed also that Anne had no knowledge of any Sean Molly. In fact, they had indeed gone to school together. He had been class president. It wasn't the first time they had heard from Sean. For reasons he didn't fully understand, Julian had chosen not to enlighten his chief.

As he drove, he debated with himself the wisdom of revealing any of this to Anne. He knew that after her initial panic subsided there would come the dawning realization that Julian could not stand guard indefinitely. In a week he would return to the midnight shift. After that would come the swing shift, when he wouldn't return until after midnight. Only one week a month would he be home after dark. As he turned onto their street, dusk was already settling over the houses, draining the color from the landscape and leaving an orange hue in the western sky. Late November leaves, russet and desiccated, scuttled across the asphalt like scorpions, lodging themselves against the tires of parked cars or becoming trapped in pools of water left by the last rain.

Julian slowed his car and studied each of the automobiles at the curb. He looked closely for signs of condensation on the interior of the windshield or driver's-side window. Nothing. No food wrappers or other accumulated trash on the dashboards. No telltale piles of clothing in the backseats.

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He turned into his drive and stopped the car. Getting out, he quietly closed the door, wanting just a few more moments to study the neighborhood and compose himself before going in. Across the street the well-lit and cheerful homes of his neighbors glowed warmly as a soft misting of rain blew gently from the south. Julian noted how easily the interior of the homes could be viewed from the darkening street, the people inside going about their tasks oblivious of his watching. It seemed every yard was crowded with shrubs and trees that grew ominous as the light bled away.

As he entered the house, both kids looked up and said, "Hi, Dad!" in unison. Julian could see Anne rattling around in the kitchen. The house felt warm and welcoming. He hung his coat up in the foyer and walked over to the children, kissing each on the top of the head. They remained intent on their game. He didn't mind. In fact, it felt good to know that they were so sure of him that they could take him for granted. He turned toward the kitchen.

Anne was just retrieving a loaf of bread from the oven as he entered. Soda bread, by the smell of it, Julian thought. His mouth watered and he was instantly ravenous . . . and not just for food. He pulled Anne to him and kissed her, wanting to envelop and protect her. Her body, at first tense with surprise, gradually relaxed and conformed to his. When their lips finally parted, she gazed at him quizzically, a touch of mischief in her green eyes.

"My goodness, Sergeant, I may have to file a complaint about your behavior."

"Yes ma'am," he replied earnestly. "If you'd like to step up to my office, I'm sure I've got the paperwork you'll need. Naturally, I'd like the opportunity to respond to any . . . questions you may have. Perhaps we can work things out between us." She looked tempted.

"Guess what?" a voice behind them asked.

Julian looked over Anne's shoulder as she hastily extricated herself and felt a sense of déjà vu, remembering a similar scene, was it a year ago? in their old home. Conner patiently waited for the proper response.

Julian smiled at Anne, who was now busy at the counter, her back to them. "What?" he dutifully supplied.

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"Mr. Olivera says that somebody's been campin' out in his shed."

Julian's momentary sense of well-being drained instantly away at his son's innocent remark. He knelt down to speak to Conner.

"When did he tell you this, son?"

"Couple 'a days ago. I forgot. He wants you to come see."

"All right. I'll stop over after dinner."

Conner wasn't finished. "He said it was weird. He thinks it's a crazy person."

Julian felt rivulets of ice begin to course through his body. "Why'd he say that, Connor?"

" 'Cause of the stick men. The crazy man made little stick men and stuck them all over the shed."

Dinner was a subdued affair, with Julian's edgy replies to any attempt at conversation causing a fog of uneasiness to settle over the table. More than once, he caught Anne watching him curiously. As soon as the meal was finished, he excused himself to make the promised visit to Mr. Olivera's.

Olivera lived two doors down on the largest lot in the neighborhood. He was an elderly man whose wife had died several years before. He now devoted all his energies to his home and property and set the standard that the rest of his neighbors futilely attempted to emulate. He was proud of this and seldom hesitated in giving advice and pointed suggestions to his more slatternly neighbors. This being the prerogative of the standard-bearer.

Julian rang the doorbell and had only to wait a moment before the door was flung open by the energetic Olivera and he was greeted by his critical visage.

"By God, it's about time the police took an interest! Lucky for me this wasn't an emergency!" he trumpeted.

Julian had the feeling that Olivera had been standing behind the door, counting the minutes since he first dispatched the ten-year-old Conner with the message two days before.

"Sorry, Mr. Olivera. Conner just remembered to tell me about your shed a little while ago. You know how boys are." You could have called the station and requested a patrol car if you were that concerned, Julian concluded inwardly.

Olivera was not interested in excuses, however, and was already leading Julian through the house and out the back door to the shed.

"Could've been murdered in my sleep," he murmured ominously, throwing an accusing glance over his shoulder at Julian.

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"Worse could happen," Julian mumbled in reply.

"What's that?" Olivera spun around, coming to a stop in front of the outbuilding and eyeing Julian suspiciously.

"I said, what exactly happened?"

"See for yourself. I left everything as I found it, even though anybody could see that it's been broken into."

Maybe even the cops? Julian thought sourly.

Olivera carefully removed the padlock and flung open the double doors, revealing the interior. At first glance, he did not, in fact, notice anything unusual. It was much as he would expect of Olivera, crowded with tools and lawn equipment, yet a place for everything and everything in its place. It was only at the back of the large, roomlike shed that he noticed another's influence.

Underneath a swing-out window was the intruder's "nest." It consisted of several lawn-chair cushions laid end to end on a huge bed of pine needles to form a divan. Julian guessed the needles were for insulation against the cold that would seep through the concrete floor and into the plastic-covered cushions. Several pictures were pinned to the wall over the bed and Julian stepped closer to look.

As he leaned over the lair, his nostrils were assailed by the animal odor of old sweat and unwashed clothes. He drew back involuntarily and noted old man Olivera nodding in satisfaction. Obviously, he too had encountered the stench when he discovered the mess.

Julian blew out through his nose and leaned forward again, crouching down as he did so. The pictures, garishly brilliant reproductions torn from the pages of a book, laughed back at him. Each page depicted the beautifully developed body of a man or woman surmounted by the head of an elephant or monkey and cavorting in gleeful abandon. Some wielded swords and others musical instruments. One serene beauty had retained the head of a woman and was captured mid-step in the dance, her blue, voluptuous body frozen with a shapely leg raised and cocked to one side, each of her eight arms clutching a curved and gleaming sword as she advanced on the viewer. The full lips of her sensual face curved upwards in a lazy, beatific smile of pleasurable anticipation of the destruction she promised.

Julian squatted on his haunches, staring, his breath becoming shallow, and remembered back to a time, years ago, when he had stared at the same pictures. It was about six months after

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their marriage that a package had come in the mail for Anne. He had stood by while she opened it like a schoolgirl at Christmas. She had just assumed it was a late wedding gift.

The plain brown-paper wrapping was torn off to reveal a thick hardbound book. When she opened it, a note fluttered to the floor. Julian quietly retrieved it while Anne flipped curiously through the pages. She halted at the illustrations, a funny, fearful look coming over her face.

Julian, meanwhile, had quickly given up trying to decipher the meaning of the shaky block writing. The writer rambled incoherently about her soul and his desire to see her attain a higher plane through Krishna. A wrinkled photo of a smiling Indian guru was pasted to the note.

"What . . . what does this mean? Julian?" She pushed the book away, unable to tear her eyes away from the depiction of Kali advancing. The same picture that Julian was staring at now. "Who sent this?" He could hear the fear creeping into her voice. "I never ordered anything like this!"

He had handed her the note. "Somebody named Sean Molly."

Her face looked more bewildered than ever. "Sean Molly," she repeated. "Sean Molly . . . I don't know a Sean . . . Oh my God! Sean Molly! He was our class president in high school! He must be playing a joke! Read the note! It's probably some sort of five-year-reunion gag."

Julian passed it over to her and said quietly, "I did read it, hon, and I don't think it's a joke."

He had handed her the note and watched as she read it.

"Julian, I don't like this. It seems so strange that he should send this to me. I hardly knew him. What does it mean? What does he want?" She never looked up, but continued to stare at her clenched fists.

There was no threat, veiled or otherwise, that Julian could decipher, yet he had been made uneasy by it too. Moreover, his sense of protectiveness, so pronounced in young men, was aroused, threatened and frustrated by the nebulousness of this direct communication with his young bride.

Later that night they had quarreled violently, Julian accusing Anne of hiding some prior relationship with Sean Molly. She had pleaded tearfully with him to believe that she had known him only in passing and had never so much as dated him. In the end, he had believed her, feeling deeply ashamed of his own

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insecurities and mortified at his self-centeredness.

The following morning, exhausted from sleeplessness, he had risen early, repackaged the book, and mailed it back to its origin. Anne and he had agreed not to speak of it again and to return any other communications from the unbalanced Molly.

Five years later, they received another package from the now forgotten Molly. This one had contained a crude wooden rattle, daubed with various colors of oil paint. There was no explanation in the accompanying note, only the even more incoherent ramblings of a fanatic. Anne was admonished to chant her mantra and "get right." The tone was stern and fatherly.

This time, Anne was crying after she read the letter and Julian angrily smashed the crude instrument before mailing it back. When he returned from the post office, he held Anne in his arms for a long time without speaking. After all, what could he say? Once again, there was no threat; in fact, Molly's concern for her welfare was obvious, if outlandish. In time, they forgot again.

Until now. The illustrations in the shed left no doubt in Julian's mind that Molly had been there. Years after his last contact with them, Sean Molly had resurfaced . . . and this time in the flesh. Or almost.

Behind Julian the cranky voice of his neighbor was saying something about the window and pry marks. It was then that Julian saw the stick figures perched on the sill, tiny warriors about four inches high. He picked one up. The stick comprising the body had been carefully chosen. It was forked for half its length and these branches provided its legs. The arms were simulated by the attachment of a single crosspiece held in place by a rubber band. The head was depicted by the simple expedient of painting the tip of the body red. Julian took it that the figures were intended to be male, for their creator had removed the bark everywhere but the fork. On this remained a scaly pair of black trousers.

The figures were unmistakably martial. The left arm of the one Julian held clasped a shiny, serrated holly leaf as a shield, while its right brandished a sewing needle for a lance, its point mere inches from Julian's face.

Julian looked out across the lawns, through the trees and intervening shrubbery to a home. A home with a well-lit family room that was easily visible. Inside, a woman and her two chil-

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dren moved about within the glowing warmth, gesturing and interacting in a pantomime of family life. Just an ordinary family waiting for the father to return. Oblivious to being watched from the wet darkness and dreamed about in the rank foulness of this nest. Julian's family. He looked at them as Molly must have done for many nights and as his tiny surrogate was doing even now.

Julian cupped the manikin in his hand like an ember left behind by Molly's smoldering madness. He looked again at his wife and children and decided to track down and kill Sean Molly.

That night, after the children were asleep, he brought Anne into the living room. He couldn't bear the idea of their sitting exposed in the family room at the back of the house. Its open-air quality now seemed a foolish mistake, a bold challenge to the darkness and what lay concealed within it.

He could see that he had made Anne apprehensive by his unusual actions and dreaded even more the revelations that he knew he had to make: In spite of his desire to protect her from all knowledge of Molly's new and unprecedented actions, his policeman's experience told him that only through awareness of the threat could she take the precautions necessary to protect herself and the children.

They sat in the semidarkness of their new house and Julian, smiling with embarrassment, handed her the letter. He had hidden the detective's report in his desk. He couldn't bring himself to reveal to her that he had actually been the subject of an internal investigation, however bogus the allegations. His ears burned with shame just thinking about it, and he had a brief vision of pounding Molly into something unrecognizable.

Anne took the proffered letter with a slightly shaking hand, looking hard into his eyes as she did so. Her pursed lips and wary eyes told him that she was expecting bad news.

She sat there without reading it and asked quietly, with the smallest of tremors in her voice, "Is this about another woman?"

Julian stared back, uncomprehending for a moment, her response was so unexpected. Then he laughed, loud and harsh, anger and fear mingling together in a sudden explosion.

"It's from Molly," he answered, his face now flinty and hard.

"Who's she?" Anne whispered back hoarsely.

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Julian understood that he had compounded her misunderstanding by the use of Sean's last name and was warmed that after all these years she still felt he was attractive enough that she should be fearful of another woman. If only it were that mundane, he thought.

He took her hand. "Sean Molly . . . your old class president. It's from him."

Hours later, in the breathing darkness of their sleeping home, he eased out of bed and made his way downstairs. With the expertise of one who has worked half his life in darkness, he removed Anne's high school annual from the bookshelf and took it into the kitchen. Using only the light over the stove, he opened it to the M's and scanned for Molly. His finger came to rest on the clear and hopeful face of a boy about to begin his journey into manhood. Smooth and unlined, it gave no hint of the madness that must have been brewing even then beneath the innocuous surface. Julian noted that he proudly sported a full set of sideburns and had the longish hair that had been all the rage then.

Julian memorized each bland feature and tried to age it, an exercise in mental Identi-Kit. But every time he managed to conjure a face, it would drift away, insubstantial as smoke. Now and again, he would glance at the windows, wondering if Molly would be there, drawn to the unusual light like a moth, his face pressed against the screen. There was only darkness.

Julian brooded and pondered the web he and his family had been drawn into, and that he himself had begun to weave. He had lied to Anne. Lies of omission. He had not told her of his discovery in Olivera's shed, nor of the contents of the detectives' report. Specifically, the interview with the New York constable. This he had kept to himself, nursing its hideous implications. He unfolded the report now and smoothed it onto the tabletop. His eyes, smarting with fatigue, sought and held one paragraph in particular:

> What really got my attention about this fella was a phone call from the local hardware store. 'Course, I'd noticed him before, he's kinda hard to miss, what with the topknot and face paint and stinky clothes, but this was about a check. Seems he'd bought himself a hatchet and wrote in the memo blank, "For Weapon." There's no law against that, but naturally, I filed it away for future reference

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and have tried to keep my eye on him. That was a few months ago and I haven't seen much of him since. According to some of the locals, he's part Hare Krishna and part Mansonite . . . thinks blacks are gonna rise up and kill all white people. And just for variety, he's convinced Hitler's still alive, just layin' low.

"Hitler," Julian said aloud, the name hanging in the air like poisonous gas. He got up and retrieved a locked box he kept hidden in the house and placed it on the table. He opened it with a tiny key and gazed at the contents. Musty papers and letters, a few curling black-and-white photographs. In one of them, his father, younger than Julian was now, smiled handsomely back at the camera, proudly bedecked in his Class B WWII uniform, a Europe in rubble in the background. Julian carefully lifted the picture, drawing scant comfort from the confident young soldier, and withdrew a 7.65mm. Mauser semiautomatic pistol. War booty taken from a slain Nazi officer in 1944, now a family heirloom. Unregistered and untraceable.

Julian knew that it was still operable, as he had test fired it on the police range a few times. It wasn't very powerful, being designed primarily as a last-resort weapon. At close range, Julian knew it would do the job. The irony of its origin and its intended victim was not lost on him, but gave him no joy, the black weight of the gun pulling him beneath the dark surface of a silent, lonely lake with hardly a ripple.

The trip to the village, nestled in amongst the mountains overlooking the Hudson River, took five hours of nonstop driving. Julian made a point of checking into an overpriced motel on the main strip, where he could count on a steady flow of travelers to blend in with. The village itself was another half mile down the road.

The room was reasonably clean, but had a damp, unwholesome feel to it. He noticed ancient stains in various places on the worn carpet. It was easy to imagine that in such a place, so devoid of character and promising such anonymity, a man could lose himself. Anything could happen.

He threw open the curtains and saw his nondescript rental car looking in at him like a great dull beast. His own car was garaged at Newark Airport. Just an added precaution. He sat in a mushy armchair and stared back, dully aware of the inter-

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mittent traffic beyond. On the horizon, tendrils of mist rushed headlong over the mountaintops like silent and searching banshees, only to tear themselves apart on the tall evergreens.

It had not been hard to get there. Julian had accumulated a lot of vacation time over the past year, and in his newly promoted zeal, had not used a day. That, and the understandable stress that the Sean Molly allegations must have caused him and his family, ensured the captain's signature on his leave request.

Anne had been fearful when he told her of his plans, but he had assured her in his most logical and policemanlike way that it was necessary. By going to New York, he would be able to assess the threat more realistically and make it clear to the constable that he was very concerned about the safety of his family. Something a phone conversation just could not convey. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to get a good look at Molly, in case, someday, he needed to identify him for charges. It all made good sense and . . . it was all a lie.

On his way out the door, after holding each of his children for a long moment, he remarked casually that his service weapon was locked up in the bedroom, though it was unlikely that she would have any need of it, as the constable in New York had assured him by telephone the day before that Molly had resurfaced, more disheveled and loudly psychotic than ever. He could almost see Anne's relief in visible waves. The mistrust and lurking fear in her eyes instantly vanished. He knew she would never remember the Mauser.

It was just after dusk when he found the address in the police report by using the map he had picked up at the chamber of commerce. It was situated at the end of a little cul-de-sac. The steeply descending street was potholed and erupted, looking as if it might slide down the mountainside. The lone two-story house situated at the end, on the north side, gave the appearance of struggling to free itself from the clinging vegetation it was immersed in, and losing. Julian thought it looked like a playhouse built by some doting father long, long ago. All the paint had peeled off and it had achieved a uniform weathered greyness that created the effect of it gradually diminishing in the growing twilight. As he watched, it vanished, like a witch's house.

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He brought out his binoculars, trained them on the space that the house had occupied, and waited. The outline of the house returned first, then details began to reappear. At the edge of his vision, something toppled from the overflowing garbage can in the front yard and quickly scurried into the overturned and crushed one next to it. The can rocked slightly on its warped sides. Still no light appeared behind the uncurtained windows.

Moments later, a small flame leapt into life, spluttered, and died, briefly illuminating a figure through the smeared glass of a second-floor window. A faint and flickering glow followed, gradually resolving itself into a small tongue of fire that began to travel like a will-o'-the-wisp from room to room, its bearer invisible in the greater darkness. Mesmerized, Julian followed its progress as it appeared and disappeared from each window, first on the second floor, then on the first. Once done, the inspection was repeated, as Molly returned to the second floor and then again to the first. Ceaselessly walking his rounds, searching for, or guarding against, something only he could know or perceive, haunting his own house. Sometime after midnight, with the eerie pantomime still in progress, Julian fell asleep.

The cold awakened him, shivering and stiff, with the sun's oblique rays painfully piercing his bloodshot eyes. A blanket he had brought along lay on the seat next to him, forgotten. His neck felt as if it was in a vise and he had no idea of the time. He glanced at his watch; it read eight-ten. The day had cleared, the sky scrubbed blue and huge, but the temperature had dropped considerably. He considered starting the car to run the heater, but decided against it, knowing it would create plumes of exhaust in the frigid air. Instead, he reached for his thermos and hoped that the coffee within was at least tepid.

It was then that he saw Molly striding down the center of the short street toward him. It was too late to duck down, as Molly would have to have been blind not to see him. He cursed his carelessness, thrusting the thermos away and resting his hand on the gun tucked into his waistband. He sat up straight and unlatched the door, in case he needed to open it quickly. Then, for the first time, he studied Sean Molly in the flesh.

Like an apparition, Molly kept coming, his saffron robe billowing from his tall, lank body like a ship in full sail. His narrow, shaven skull, capped by a strip of hair that ran down the back

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of his head, moved neither left nor right, but followed the slightly protuberant, hot-looking eyes that focused on the horizon or beyond. The wide straight mouth appeared to be working, the strained tendons in the scrawny neck rising and falling in tortured unison. Julian felt the hairs on the backs of his hands rising.

As Molly reached the front of the car, Julian could see the starved-looking face more clearly. A swastika was crudely tattooed in black on his left cheek and his forehead was daubed with yellow, a drop of it having run between his eyes and onto the bridge of his straight nose. In his left hand he was carrying something wrapped in brown paper.

Julian swung open the door to block Molly's passage. Unfazed, Molly simply gave it a wide berth, his eyes never once straying from their distant hold, and strode on, mumbling audibly now. Julian caught a glimpse of familiar writing on the package.

"Molly!" he shouted at Sean's retreating back, rage rising like vomit in his throat, hot and sickening. "You know who I am, you Hare Krishna Nazi bastard! You've watched me and my family enough! Now it's my turn! How's it feel? Do ya like it?" He wanted to choke the life out of this useless, frightening creature. "Stop, goddamn you!"

Molly halted and turned partially around, his face contorting rapidly, like rats under a blanket. Raising his right hand in the air, palm open, level with his head, he screamed in a high, girlish voice, "I could just slap you silly!" and stomped the ground with his booted foot. With that, he resumed his headlong march without a backward glance, his incongruous army boots slapping the broken asphalt. Never once had he looked at Julian.

Julian was waiting for him when he entered the post office, pretending to fill out a change-of-address card. Molly's *outré* costume and pulsating madness filled the tiny customer-service area as soon as he entered. Two elderly women, who had previously been engaged in a fascinating discussion of current weather conditions, decided that it wasn't that cold out after all, and fled the building. An old man simply gaped, transfixed, mouth loose and watery eyes blinking rapidly behind his thick, smeared lenses.

Molly's aggressive demeanor altered suddenly as he approached the counter. His head dropped to his chest and his

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stride changed to a shuffle. Humbly, he slid the package forward like a slow student with a late report. The lone postal worker continued to sort through the morning's take at a worktable in the rear, oblivious to the offering.

Julian's hand shot out and grabbed the parcel, spinning it around so that he could read the address. Molly gasped and began to mutter, never lifting his eyes to the interloper.

"I can save you the postage, Sean, and deliver this personally, since it's my house you're sending it to." Julian spoke quietly, his eyes never leaving Molly's face. Molly began to wring his hands in anxiety. "In fact, why don't we open it now? The suspense is killing me." With that, he shook the box. Inside, something slid from end to end with a dry rattle.

Molly sprang to life with a small cry, snatching the box from Julian's grasp and rushing toward the exit. Over his shoulder, he cried out, "Devil! Devil bastard!" Then he began running, crying loudly, "Help! Help! Help!"

Julian sprang after him into the street. "You crazy son of a bitch! Leave my family alone! Do you understand me? Leave my family alone or I'll kill you!" he screamed at Molly's fleeing figure. The impotent rage and fear of the past week exploded from him, leaving him drained and almost tearful on the streets of a town where no one knew him. All around him people had stopped to stare. Not at the robed lunatic he had chased out of the post office, but at him. A violent, threatening stranger. He had never felt so cast adrift, so separated from humanity. Avoiding meeting anyone's eyes, Julian began the long walk back to his car, consciously squaring his shoulders and pretending desperately that he was not ashamed.

It was long after dark when he checked out of the motel. He had spent the day sleeping and had packed immediately upon waking. There was no point in staying on. He had failed in his self-appointed mission. Molly was still alive . . . still a threat, an uncontrollable force that might remain static or suddenly blow into a storm with unpredictable results. Yet, Julian knew that he could not strike him down, provoked or not, and was heavily laden that he had sunk so low as to have attempted to bait a madman.

Praying for some insight, he pulled away from the motel, pondering the hodgepodge of beliefs and rituals that gave form to

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Sean Molly's persona. Shortly afterwards, he found himself parked with his lights out on the now familiar street facing Molly's shack.

For a long time, he watched as Sean went through his obviously ritual paces, lighting candles and marching from room to room, and he thought of the walls that madness erects around us, brick by brick. He thought too, long and lovingly, of the Lady Anne and his own misguided knight-errant quest to protect her. Of how easy it was to love her vulnerability and how even someone as lost as Molly might remember her and cherish that memory of unrequited, simple boyhood love and want to protect her, just as Julian had been doing. It was only when he heard the high-pitched squealing that he realized that the house was on fire.

Julian sat dumbstruck for a moment, unable to move. The flames were leaping from room to room, eagerly consuming the dry-rotted walls, as the figure of Molly rushed to and fro, upstairs and down, without once making for the door. Irreverently, Julian wondered, for just a moment, if this was not God's answer to his prayers. Then he began a mad sprint for the house, carrying the wool blanket he had kept in the front seat for his surveillance.

Kicking open the front door, he was greeted with a great rush of scorching air and fell back. He took a deep breath, crouched, and waded in under the smoke that was beginning to flow through the newly created exit, holding the blanket over his head. In the hallway, he shouted Molly's name and got a mouthful of choking smoke for his trouble. Above his own coughing, he heard Molly's beseeching squeals and saw a figure wearing robes of flames streak across the hallway from one room to the next. Julian rushed after him, only to be bowled over as Molly ran back out again like a comet. Blindly, Julian reached out and snagged an ankle. With a crash that shook the floorboards, Molly slammed into the floor, his squeals now hellish screams of pain. Using the blanket, Julian climbed on top of him, smothering the flames as he went.

Flipping the unconscious form over on top of the smoldering blanket, Julian now began to crawl backwards, pulling Molly, sledlike, towards the door. The heat and smoke had become so intense that he felt as if he would combust spontaneously any moment, and it was only by sheer willpower that he didn't aban-

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don Molly and run screaming for air. Somewhere, far-off it seemed, there was the sound of sirens, and he struggled toward the sound, hoping that it was leading him in the right direction.

Suddenly he was surrounded by glass-faced monsters that seized him roughly and rushed him into the blessed night air. Through his squinting, reddened eyes, he saw Molly being placed on a stretcher and medics bending over him. The house was an inferno, the frame shimmering like a ghost within the flames and groaning like the damned in hell. The firefighter was saying something and slapping Julian on the back.

"You saved his life, bud! Hell of a job! He a friend of yours?"

Julian managed a smile and lied, "No, I was just passing by."

Before he checked out of the hospital the next morning, Julian stopped in to see Molly. He had been lucky. His burns, though painful, had not been that severe. His arms and back had suffered the most and he was heavily sedated for the pain. For the first time, he focused on Julian, his eyes rolling and sliding with the effort.

Julian leaned down and whispered. "Sean, do you know who I am?"

Molly nodded a little.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Again, a nod.

"Do you understand what it means?"

Molly only stared, a puzzled look in his eyes.

Julian explained. "It's karma, old friend. You know what that means, I know. You believe in karma, don't you?"

A look of comprehension dawned quickly, then a nod.

"It means all this had to happen for me to be in the right place, at the right time, to save your life. Now it's done and we can stop. We've completed the circle and you can leave me and mine in peace. You've been released. This is what it means."

Julian saw tears forming in Molly's eyes and knew he had understood and, with that understanding, that he had to give up something important in his life. His protectorship was finally at an end. "Thank you," he croaked.

Julian stood and patted his hand. As he was going out the door, he turned. "It was meant to be," he said softly and, walking away, thought of his return to the Lady Anne, his sword unbloodied, but the grail firmly in hand. ●

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Art by Anthony Bari

Poor Natalie

by Katherine H. Brooks

Natalie, Natalie, can't you see
That the jig is up, and your life could be
No more dependent on fickle fate
Than the scurvy plans of your callous mate?

Natalie, Natalie, guard your back!
He's bent on launching a sneak attack.
Your brakes will falter and fail to catch.
Your hair spray begs for a careless match.
Your ladder features a loosened rung.
Your ceiling fan isn't firmly hung.
Your electric stove has a fractured wire,
And the cellar's ready to catch on fire.

Natalie, Natalie, write your will.
Your rose bush calls for some extra fill.
The asp that coils in your sewing kit
Is slyly anxious to score a hit.
For tea—the arsenic's close at hand,
And Frank has purchased a mourning band
With fervent hopes for a quick release.
He's engraving a marker with "Rest in Peace."

Natalie, Natalie, say a prayer.
You're a sure-fire victim if Frank's still there,
But you've never yielded without a fight.
GO SNUFF HIM OUT WHILE HE SLEEPS TONIGHT!

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Art by Greg Voth

HOME IS THE PLACE WHERE

by Bill Pronzini

It was one of those little crossroads places you still find occasionally in the California back country. Relics of another era; old dying things, with precious little time left before they crumble into dust. Weathered wooden store, gas pumps, a detached service garage that also housed restrooms, some warped little tourist cabins clustered close behind; a couple of junk-car husks and a stand of dusty shade trees. This one was down in the central part of the state, southeast of San Juan Bautista, on the way to the Pinnacles National Monument. The name on the pocked metal sign on the store roof was *Benson's Oasis*. There were four cabins and the shade trees were cottonwoods.

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No other cars sat on the apron in front when I pulled in at a few minutes past two. Nor were there any vehicles back by the cabins. The only spot to hide one was in the detached garage—and it was shut up tight. Maybe something in that, maybe not.

Heat hammered at me when I got out, thick and deep-summer dry. In the distance, haze blurred the shapes of the brown hills of the Diablo range. It was flat here, and dust-blown, and quiet. The feeling you had was of isolation, emptiness, and displacement in time. For me, it was a pleasant feeling, not at all unsettling. I like the past; I like it a hell of a lot better than I like the present or the prospects for the future.

In *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers,* Edward D. Hoch said this about Bill Pronzini's Nameless Detective series: "In Pronzini's early novels and short stories, the influence of the pulp magazines he and his 'Nameless Detective' protagonist collect seems especially noticeable. Certainly Nameless himself, operating out of San Francisco, owes something to Hammett's Continental Op." But Nameless also has a style all his own, and a generous sense of humanity that comes out in all his cases.

It was even hotter inside the store. No air conditioning, just an old-fashioned ceiling fan that stirred the air in a way that made me think of a ladle stirring bouillon. Under the fan flies floated in random lethargic circles, as if they'd been drugged. The old man behind the counter at the rear had the same drugged, listless aspect. He was perched on a stool, studying a book of some kind that was open on the countertop. A bell had tinkled to announce my arrival but at first he didn't look up. He turned a page as I crossed the room; it made a dry rustling sound. The page was black, with what looked to be photographs and paper items affixed to it. A scrapbook.

When I reached him he shut the book. It had a brown simulated-leather cover, the word *Memories* embossed on it in gilt. The gilt had flaked and faded and the ersatz leather was cracked: The book was almost as old as he was. Over seventy, I

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judged. Thin, stoop-shouldered, white hair as fine as rabbit fur. Heavily seamed face. Bent left arm that was also knobbed and crooked at the wrist, as if it had been badly broken once and hadn't healed well.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You're the owner? Everett Benson?"

"I am."

"I'm looking for your son, Mr. Benson."

No reaction.

"Have you seen him, heard from him, in the past two days?"

Still nothing for several seconds. Then, "I have no son."

"Stephen," I said. "Stephen Arthur Benson."

"No."

"He's in trouble. Serious trouble."

Face like a chunk of eroded limestone, eyes like cloudy agates imbedded in it. "I have no son," he said again.

I took out one of my business cards, tried to give it to him. He wouldn't take it. Finally I laid it on the counter in front of him. "Stephen was in jail in San Francisco," I said, "on a charge of selling amphetamines and crack cocaine. Did you know that?"

Silence.

"He talked the woman he was living with into going to a bondsman and bailing him out. The bail was low and she had just enough collateral to swing it. His trial date was yesterday. Two nights ago he stole a hundred dollars from the woman, and her car, and jumped bail."

More silence.

"The bondsman hired me to find him and bring him back," I said. "I think he came here. You're his only living relative, and he needs more money than he's got to keep on running. He could steal it but it would be easier and safer to get it from you."

Benson pushed off his stool, picked up the scrapbook, laid it on a shelf behind him. Several regular hardback books lined the rest of the shelf, all of them old and well-read; in the weak light I couldn't make out any of the titles.

"Aiding and abetting a fugitive is a felony," I said to his back, "even if the fugitive is your own son. You don't want to get yourself in trouble with the law, do you?"

He said again, without turning, "I have no son."

For the moment I'd taken the argument as far as it would go. I left him and went out into the midday glare. And straight over to the closed-up service garage.

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There were two windows along the near side, both dusty and speckled with ground-in dirt, but I could see clearly enough through the first. Sufficient daylight penetrated the gloom so I could identify the two vehicles parked in there. One was a dented, rusted, thirty-year-old Ford pickup that no doubt belonged to the old man. The other was a newish red Mitsubishi. I didn't have to see the license plate to know that the Mitsubishi belonged to Stephen Arthur Benson's girlfriend.

Cars drifted past on the highway; they made the only sound in the stillness. Behind the store, where the cabins were, nothing moved except for shimmers of heat. I went to the car, sleeving away sweat, and unclipped the short-barreled .38 revolver from under the dash and slid it into the pocket of my suit jacket. Maybe I'd need the gun and maybe I wouldn't, but I felt better armed. Stephen Benson was a convicted felon and something of a hard case, and for all I knew he was armed himself. He hadn't had a weapon two nights ago, according to the girlfriend, but he might have picked one up somewhere in the interim. From his father, for instance.

The stand of cottonwoods grew along the far side of the parking area. I moved over into them, made my way behind the two cabins on the south side. Both had blank rear walls and uncurtained side windows; I took my time approaching each. Their interiors were sparsely furnished, and empty of people and personal belongings.

The direct route to the other two cabins was across open ground. I didn't like the idea of that, so I went the long way—back through the trees, across in front of the store, around on the far side of the garage. It was an unnecessary precaution, as it turned out. The farthest of the north-side cabins was also empty; the near one showed plenty of signs of occupancy—clothing, books, photographs, a hotplate, a small refrigerator—but there wasn't anybody in it. This was where the old man lived, I thought. The clothing was the type he would wear and the books were similar to the ones in the store.

Nothing to do now but to go back inside and brace him again. When I entered the store he was on his stool, eating a Milky Way in little nibbling bites. He had loose false teeth and on each bite they clicked like beads on a string.

"Where is he, Mr. Benson?"

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No response. The cloudy agate eyes regarded me with the same lack of expression as before.

"I saw the car in the garage," I said. "It's the one Stephen stole from the woman in San Francisco, no mistake. Either he's still in this state or you gave him money and another car and he's on the road again. Which is it?"

He clicked and chewed; he didn't speak.

"All right then. You don't want to do this the easy way, we'll have to do it the hard way. I'll call the county police and have them come out here and look at the stolen car; then they'll charge you with aiding and abetting and with harboring stolen property. And your son will still get picked up and sent back to San Francisco to stand trial. It's only a matter of time."

Benson finished the candy bar; I couldn't tell if he was thinking over what I'd said, but I decided I'd give him a few more minutes in case he was. In the stillness, a refrigeration unit made a broken chattery hum. The heat-drugged flies droned and circled. A car drew up out front and a grumpy-looking citizen came in and bought two cans of soda pop and a bag of potato chips. "Hot as Hades out there," he said. Neither Benson nor I answered him.

When he was gone I said to the old man, "Last chance. Where's Stephen?" He didn't respond, so I said, "I've got a car phone. I'll use that to call the sheriff," and turned and started out.

He let me get halfway to the door before he said, "You win, mister," in a dull, empty voice. "Not much point in keeping quiet about it. Like you said, it's only a matter of time."

I came back to the counter. "Now you're being smart. Where is he?"

"I'll take you to him."

"Just tell me where I can find him."

"No. I'll take you there."

Might be better at that, I thought, if Stephen's close-by. Easier, less chance for trouble, with the old man along. I nodded, and Benson came out from behind the counter and crossed to where a sign hung in the window; he reversed the sign so that the word Closed faced outward. Then he went out and locked up.

I asked him, "How far do we have to go?"

"Not far."

"I'll drive, you tell me where."

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We got into the car. He directed me east on the county road that intersected the main highway. We rode in silence for about a mile. Benson sat stiff-backed, his hands gripping his knees, eyes straight ahead. In the hard daylight the knobbed bone on his left wrist looked as big as a plum.

Abruptly he said, " 'Home is the place where.' "

" . . . How's that again?"

" 'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.' "

I shrugged because the words didn't mean anything to me.

"Lines from a poem by Robert Frost," he said. " 'The Death of the Hired Man,' I think. You read Frost?"

"No."

"I like him. Makes sense to me, more than a lot of them."

I remembered the well-read books on the store shelf and in the cabin. A rural storekeeper who read poetry and admired Robert Frost. Well, why not? People don't fit into easy little stereotypes. In my profession, you learn not to lose sight of that fact.

Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. The words ran around inside my head like song lyrics. No, like a chant or an invocation—all subtle rhythm and gathering power. They made sense to me, too, on more than one level. Now I knew something more about Everett Benson, and something more about the nature of his relationship with his son.

Another couple of silent miles through sun-struck farmland. Alfalfa and wine grapes, mostly. A private farm road came up on the right; Benson told me to turn there. It had once been a good road, unpaved but well graded, but that had been a long time ago. Now there were deep grooves in it, and weeds and tall brown grass between the ruts. Not used much these days. It led along the shoulder of a sere hill, then up to the crest; from there I could see where it ended.

Benson's Oasis was a dying place, with not much time left. The farm down below was already dead—years dead. It had been built alongside a shallow creek where willows and cottonwoods grew, in the tuck where two hillocks came together: farmhouse, barn, two chicken coops, a shedlike outbuilding. Skeletons now, all of them, broken and half-hidden by high grass and shrubs and tangles of wild berry vines. Climbing primroses

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covered part of the house from foundation to roof, bright pink in the sunlight, like a gaudy fungus.

"Your property?" I asked him.

"Built it all with my own hands," he said. "After the war—Second World War—when land was cheap hereabouts. Raised chickens, alfalfa, apples. You can see there's still part of the orchard left."

There were a dozen or so apple trees stretching away behind the barn. Gnarled, bent, twisted, but still producing fruit. Rotting fruit now.

"Moved out eight years ago, when my wife died," Benson said. "Couldn't bear to live here anymore without Betty. Couldn't bear to sell the place, either." He paused, drew a heavy breath, let it out slowly. "Don't come out here much anymore. Just a couple of times a year to visit her grave."

There were no other cars in sight, but I could make out where one had angled off the roadway and mashed down an irregular swath of the summer-dead grass not long ago. I followed the same route when we reached the farmyard. The swath stopped ten yards from what was left of the farmhouse's front porch. So did I.

I had my window rolled down but there was nothing to hear except birds and insects. The air was swollen with the smells of heat and dry grass and decaying apples.

I said, "Is he inside the house?"

"Around back."

"Where around back?"

"There's a beat-down path. Just follow that."

"You don't want to come along?"

"No need. I'll stay here."

I gave him a long look. There was no tension in him, no guile; not much emotion of any kind, it seemed. He just sat there, hands on knees, eyes ahead—the same posture he'd held throughout the short trip from the crossroads.

I thought about insisting he come with me, but something kept me from doing it. I got out, taking the keys from the ignition. Before I shut the door I drew the .38; then I leaned back in to look at Benson, holding the gun down low so he couldn't see it.

"You won't blow the horn or anything like that, will you?"

"No," he said. "I won't."

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"Just wait quiet."

"Yes."

The beaten-down path was off to the right. I walked it slowly through the tangled vegetation, listening, watching my backtrail. Nothing made noise and nothing happened. The fermenting-apples smell grew stronger as I came around the house to the rear; bees swarmed back there, making a muted sawmill sound. Near where the orchard began, the path veered off toward the creek, toward a big weeping willow that grew on the bank.

And under the willow was where it ended: at the grave of Benson's wife, marked by a marble headstone etched with the words *Beloved Elizabeth—Rest in Eternal Peace.*

But hers was not the only grave there. Next to it was a second one, a new one, the earth so freshly turned some of the clods on top were still moist. That one bore no marker of any kind.

I went back to the car, not quite running. Benson was out of it now, standing a few feet away looking at the house and the climbing primroses. He turned when he heard me coming, faced me squarely as I neared him.

"Now you know," he said without emotion and without irony. "I didn't lie to you, mister. I have no son."

"Why didn't you tell me he was dead?"

"Wanted you to see it for yourself. His grave."

"How did he die?"

"I shot him," the old man said. "Last night, about ten o'clock."

"Shot him?"

"With my old Iver Johnson. Two rounds through the heart."

"Why? What happened?"

"He brought me trouble, just like before."

"You can state it plainer than that."

A little silence. Then, "He was bad, Stephen was. Mean and bad clear through. Always was, even as a boy. Stealing things, breaking up property, hurting other boys. Hurting his mother." Benson held up his crooked left arm. "Hurting me too."

"Stephen did that to you?"

"When he was eighteen. Broke my arm in three places. Two operations and it still wouldn't heal right."

"What made him do it?"

"I wouldn't give him the money he wanted. So he beat up on me to get it. I told him before he ran off, don't ever come back,

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you're not welcome in my house anymore. And he didn't come back, not in more than a dozen years. Not until last night, at the Oasis."

"He wanted money again, is that it? Tried to hurt you again when you wouldn't give it to him?"

"Punched me in the belly," Benson said. "Still hurts when I move sudden. So I went and got the Iver Johnson. He laughed when I pointed it at him and told him to get out. 'Won't shoot me, old man,' he said. 'Your own son. You won't shoot me.' "

"What did he do? Try to take the gun away from you?"

Benson nodded. "Didn't leave me any choice but to shoot him. Twice through the heart. Then I brought him out here and buried him next to his mother."

"Why did you do that?"

"I told you before. 'Home is the place where.' I had to take him in, didn't I? For the last time?"

The smell of the rotting apples seemed stronger now. And the heat was intense and the skeletal buildings and fungoid primroses were ugly. I didn't want to be here any longer—not another minute in this place.

"Get back in the car, Mr. Benson."

"Where we going?"

"Just get back in the car. Please."

He did what I told him. I backed the car around and drove up the hill and over it without glancing in the rearview mirror. Neither of us said anything until I swung off the county road onto the apron in front of Benson's Oasis and braked to a stop.

Then he asked, "You going to call the sheriff now?" Matter-of-factly; not as if he cared.

"No," I said.

"How come?"

"Stephen's dead and buried. I don't see any reason not to leave him right where he is."

"But I killed him. Shot him down like a dog."

Old and dying like his crossroads store, with precious little time left. Where was the sense—or the justice—in forcing him to die somewhere else? But all I said was, "You did what you had to do. I'll be going now. I've got another long drive ahead of me."

He put his hand on the door latch, paused with it there. "What'll you say to the man who hired you, the bail bondsman?"

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What would I say to Abe Melikian? The truth—some of it, at least. Stephen Arthur Benson is dead and in the ground and what's left of his family is poor; the bail money's gone, Abe, and there's no way you can get any of it back; write it off your taxes and forget about it. He trusted me and my judgment and he wouldn't press for details, particularly not when I waived the balance of my fee.

"You let me worry about that," I said, and Benson shrugged and lifted himself out of the car. He seemed to want to say something else; instead he turned, walked to the store. There was nothing more to say. Neither thank-yous nor goodbyes were appropriate and we both knew it.

I watched him unlock the door, switch the window sign from Closed to Open before he disappeared into the dimness within. Then I drove out onto the highway and headed north. To San Francisco. To my office and my flat and Kerry, the woman I loved.

Home is the place where. ●

"They just told me you were paroled three weeks ago! Why don't you come home?"

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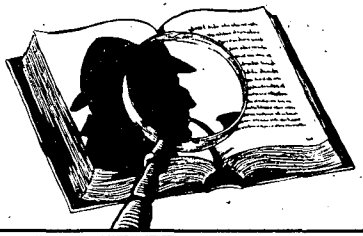

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Door to Door

by Henry Slesar

"It's the attitude," Ketchum growled. "The attitude I don't like. The guy is dead, murdered, a *victim,* that's all that matters to me."

"He made plenty of victims himself," Detective Reese said mildly. He knew better than to argue with the chief, but he couldn't help sharing some of the department "attitude" regarding the death of Harry Moss. It was hard to shed tears over the passing of a hit man with at least a dozen homicides to his credit, not one of which had ever put Moss in the queue on Death Row.

"Well, it's a safe bet one of those victims was in Chicago." Ketchum frowned over Reese's badly typed report. "If I read this right."

"It's what he said to the ambulance driver," the detective said. "Just two words. 'Chicago death . . .' He must have recognized the killer."

"Or maybe the killer wanted him to know *why* he was being whacked. That it was a payback for what he did there."

"There's only one problem," Reese said. "We don't know who Moss hit in Chicago. His career goes back a lot of years, Chief. And a lot of wiseguys have been murdered in that city."

"Well, Harry Moss was mur-

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dered in *my* city." Ketchum scowled. "And I want his killer found!"

There was still plenty of shine on Reese's detective badge. He attacked the problem with enthusiasm, and the next morning he was sitting in the chief's office when he arrived.

"A salesman!" he said.

"A what?"

"A door-to-door salesman! That's how the guy got into Moss's apartment!"

Reese had gone back to the building to talk to the doorman, a word perhaps too dignified to describe the scruffy alcoholic who guarded the portals of Moss's shabby downtown residence. He had been no help at all on Reese's first interrogation. He hadn't seen any strangers entering the building, and if he had, they wouldn't have been announced, since there were no house phones. Of course, it was possible that someone could sneak by him, someone with evil intentions, and a loaded gun with a silencer . . .

This time, however, the doorman was unnerved by Reese's visit. He began to stammer, as if suspecting that Reese had already uncovered his guilty secret. It wasn't much of of a secret. Only that a dollar or two could easily bribe him into allowing salesmen into the building with their unsolicited wares.

"There were four of them that day," Reese told the chief. "The guy gave me good descriptions of all of them."

"What were they selling?" Ketchum asked.

"One was selling vacuum cleaners, Electrolux or Hoover, he wasn't sure which. Another was a Fuller Brush man. One guy was selling the Encyclopedia Britannica. The fourth was selling magazine subscriptions."

"And they all had carrying cases, right? Convenient way to conceal the weapon."

"Just what I figured, too. The question is, how many of them knocked on Harry Moss's door?"

"No," Ketchum said. "The question is, which one of them got inside and killed him?"

"I guess that's going to take some footwork."

For the first time in two days, the chief grinned. "In this case," he said, "it'll be headwork. I think I can get you the answer right now."

He picked up the telephone.

How did the chief identify the murderous salesman? *Turn to page 67 for The Final Paragraph.*

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THE THEFT OF THE CAMPAIGN POSTER

by Edward D. Hoch

Cartwright was a small city in southern Ohio that Nick Velvet had never visited before. He supposed it was not that different from most small cities in middle America, and on this first Saturday in November the high-school marching band and the football team's cheerleaders had been recruited not for the big game but for the reelection campaign of Wilder McGee, the city's mayor.

It was a sunny afternoon with temperatures hovering in the low fifties, and just the right atmosphere for a political rally. Nick had his first glimpse of the mayor as he hurried through the crowd, shaking hands and waving, his hair tousled from the breeze. Wilder McGee was a stocky man of moderate height, with a full head of graying hair worn a bit longer than one might have expected. He was clean-shaven, with a ready smile that duplicated the one on his campaign posters. Now, surrounded by campaign workers and staff, he held up his hands to quiet the cheers and chants of the crowd that almost filled the public park across from City Hall.

"It's good to see so many happy faces just three days before the election. I know you're happy with what we've done so far,

Good news for fans of Nick Velvet! A screenplay for a Nick Velvet television pilot has just been completed by distinguished screenwriter Frank Lupo, whose credits include *The A-Team* and *Walker, Texas Ranger*. With luck we'll see Velvet on the airwaves soon, in a series of adventures as unpredictable as his stories in *EQMM*. Velvet is on the campaign trail in this new story—or nearly so.

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but it's just the beginning! We need another four years to finish the job, to make Cartwright not just a better city but a better community for the next generation. If you reelect me on Tuesday, I promise . . ."

Nick Velvet stopped listening and let his eyes scan the crowd. It seemed a genuine cross section of the region, young and old, male and female, white and black. There was only one discordant note. All eyes were on the speaker's platform except those of one man. He was standing about twenty feet away with his eyes fastened unwaveringly on Nick's face.

". . . in conclusion let me say that Thelma wishes with all her heart she could be with you today. She's recovering nicely and I promise she'll be at my side when we celebrate our victory on Tuesday night!"

The brief talk had ended on a high note that brought cheers and applause. Nick watched Mayor McGee leave the platform and mingle with the crowd. Only then did he allow his eyes to return to where the man had been standing. He was no longer in sight. His place had been taken by one of the cheerleaders, chatting with her boyfriend.

Nick headed back to his rental car, parked a few blocks away. Walking quickly, head down, he tried to memorize the features of the man who'd been watching him. An older man in his late fifties, perhaps, with pale skin and a dull look in his eyes. He didn't appear to be a detective, but one could never be certain. His apparent interest in Nick added a whole new aspect to an otherwise routine assignment in Cartwright. He'd come there, after all, only to steal a campaign poster.

Gloria had decided, in middle age, that she needed to do something useful, especially since Nick's assignments often kept him away from home for a week at a time. She'd taken some courses at the community college and gotten a job as a paralegal at a local law firm. "I like it so much I might go on to become a lawyer someday," she told Nick about a month after taking the job.

It was through one of the lawyers with whom she worked—a young man named Tommy Folger—that Nick had taken on his latest assignment. He'd suggested stopping for a drink one Friday night when Nick had come to pick up Gloria, and when she went off to the ladies' room he said, "She's working out fine. The partners all like her a lot."

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"I'm glad to hear that," Nick told him.

"You know, there was a bit of discussion before we hired her, because of your reputation."

"What reputation is that?"

"What you do for a living."

"Oh."

The blond attorney took a sip of his drink. "Ever been to Cartwright, Ohio? It's in the southern part of the state."

"I don't remember ever being to Ohio," Nick told him, "except maybe to change planes at Cleveland."

"There's a fellow I went to law school with—Eric Saine. He's running for mayor out there, against the incumbent. He needs some help before Tuesday's election."

"Sorry, I don't write campaign speeches."

Folger dropped his voice a bit. "He needs something stolen. One of his opponent's posters. We'll pay your usual fee."

"What's your connection with this?"

"He's an old friend. My wife and I are helping run his campaign." He glanced around. "And I'd just as soon Gloria didn't know about this. You know how it is."

"The poster has no value?"

"None. It'll be rubbish the day after the election."

"Where is it located?"

"At McGee's headquarters. Eric will tell you just where."

Gloria was returning to the table. "All right," Nick agreed. "I'll go tomorrow. There's not much time left."

"What have you two been chatting about?" she asked. "I hope Nick hasn't been telling you any secrets about my poor housekeeping."

"Not a word," Tommy Folger answered with a grin.

Later that night Nick told Gloria he'd been called out of town suddenly. He flew to Columbus and drove the rest of the way to Cartwright.

It was just after the rally in the park that Nick Velvet met the rival candidate for the first time. Eric Saine was, not surprisingly, in his mid-thirties—about the age of his law-school friend Tommy Folger. They met at Saine's downtown law office in a building virtually deserted on a Saturday afternoon.

Saine was a slender man with a brown moustache matching his hair, and though his smile was friendly enough there was a

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chill about his eyes that might have lost him a few votes. "Tommy Folger says you're the best at what you do," Saine told him.

"I try to be. Is Folger helping with your campaign?"

"Minor things like revising some of my speeches. We've been friends since law school. He and his wife are flying out tomorrow morning for the election. She's been a big help with women voters."

"Running against the incumbent isn't easy."

"That's why I need the campaign poster, and I need it by tomorrow if it's going to do me any good."

"Is it the one I see all over the city, with Mayor McGee and his wife posing before the new stadium?"

"That's the one, but I need the larger version that hangs on the wall at McGee's headquarters. It measures about six by nine feet."

"Is that the only one?" Nick asked.

"So far as I know, in that size. They blew it up special to hang on the wall."

"I'm sure Folger told you my fee was twenty-five thousand. What makes it that valuable to you?"

"That's confidential for the present." He reached into a drawer and produced the traditional thick envelope. "Half now and the rest when you deliver."

"That'll be tomorrow morning," Nick assured him. "Before noon."

He left the building and walked back to the side street where he'd parked his rented car. It wasn't until he reached the car and was about to enter it that he realized he was being followed. It was the same man who'd been watching him during Wilder McGee's rally earlier that afternoon. He pretended to have trouble with the key in his car door, and as the man walked past, Nick spun around and grabbed him. "Looking for me?"

The pale, pasty-faced man jerked back, trying to break free. When he realized Nick's grip on his arm was too strong, his face relaxed into a sly stare. "You look like your father," he said. "But I knew that from the picture."

Nick loosened his grip. "What picture? Who are you?"

"Name's Sam Creed. I was in prison with your father."

"You've made a mistake—"

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"No mistake. He keeps your picture in his cell. I recognized you right away, figured I'd see what you were up to."

Nick rarely spoke of his father, and this man was an unwelcome intrusion at the moment. "I'm passing through," he said. "I'd suggest you do likewise."

Sam Creed chuckled. "I live in Cartwright. When I got released two months ago I came back home. What about you? Is there a caper in the works? What's your interest in Mayor McGee?"

It was Nick's turn to chuckle. "Sure you're not a reporter? You'd make a great investigator for one of those talk shows."

The sly stare returned. "Yeah? Maybe something on the great thieves!"

"You give me too much credit."

"Your father told me all about you."

"He was always boasting. Get lost, Sam, before you get hurt."

"A threat?"

"Just advice." Nick unlocked the car and slid inside. He left Sam Creed standing at the curb, but he didn't pretend he'd seen the last of him.

Nick's next stop was Wilder McGee's campaign headquarters, a hub of activity with the election only three days away. It was located in a downtown storefront, a large high-ceilinged place that had previously served as an upscale men's clothing store. He'd noticed other empty shops along Cartwright's main streets, a sign that its downtown was suffering like those of other small and middle-sized American cities.

The large poster was there along with mirrored letters spelling *McGee*. A half-dozen campaign workers seated at a long table greeted supporters, passing out buttons and organizing a get-out-the-vote telephone drive. With the poster forming the high point of the storefront's meager decor, Nick knew it would be useless to try talking the workers out of it. There was no way they'd give it up before Tuesday's election, no matter what story he thought up.

Nick stood there for a moment studying it. Wilder McGee and his wife, an attractive dark-haired woman in her forties, stood before a new city stadium of some sort. His right hand was extended in greeting, apparently toward the oncoming crowd. The headline on the poster read: *Make it a Wilder Future with*

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McGee! Nick wondered if a wilder future was really what most voters wanted.

"May I help you with anything?" the young woman behind the desk asked. She was rosy-cheeked and looked youthful enough to have been a cheerleader at the rally. Her nametag read *Marsha.*

"I was just admiring the poster," he told her. "Do you have any of these?"

"We have them in an eight by ten size. Take as many as you want."

"One's enough, thanks." It seemed identical to the large one. He wondered if stealing it was simply a stunt, like a college stealing a rival's mascot before the big game.

"Do you have your name on our list of volunteers?" Marsha asked him. Her eyes were looking up, at something beyond his left shoulder. Finally he glanced around and saw a television set mounted on the wall above the door. "Sorry," she said with a smile, flicking the set off with the remote control. "We use it to watch the rallies. I just forgot to turn it off."

"There's a rally tonight, isn't there?"

"A debate," she corrected. "Between Mayor McGee and Mr. Saine. It's at the City Center and everyone's going, except a few of us who'll be working late lining up volunteers. How about you?"

"I'm from out of town," he answered apologetically. "I expect to be gone by Monday. However, I'm especially interested in your new stadium." He gestured toward the big poster. "Did it just open?"

Marsha nodded. "In time for the football season. It'll be used for baseball next year too, of course. Cartwright has a Double-A team."

"I wish you every success. Was this picture taken on opening day?"

"That's right, in late September."

"There aren't many people around," Nick observed, studying the picture.

"I think they took it in the morning before the crowds arrived for the opening ceremonies. Thelma McGee was already coming down with the flu, and I suspect she was feeling poorly."

"I gathered she's been sick."

Another nod. "She's been in bed for most of the campaign. I saw her at the house last week, though, and she looked much

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better. Mayor McGee promises she'll be at his side on election night."

"That's good news." He rolled up the smaller version of the poster and departed.

That evening's debate, apparently the final one of the campaign, was scheduled for eight o'clock at the City Center. Nick's first thought had been to break into the storefront headquarters while everyone was at the debate and simply remove the poster from the wall. However, he knew from past experience that if the theft could be accomplished that easily there'd have been no need to pay for his rather expensive services.

When he parked down the street from McGee's headquarters he could see lights burning in the storefront even though there was a Closed sign on the door. There were lights in the back room too, and as he walked past the building he could see several people working back there. The young woman named Marsha was alone at the front table, sorting envelopes for a last-minute mailing. He saw her glance at the upper wall and caught a reflection of the television screen in the mirrored letters of McGee's name. Occasionally Marsha would yell something back to the other room where they must have been watching the debate on another set.

Nick had noticed an electronics store down the block a bit and he headed back to it now, hoping they were still open on a Saturday night. They were, and a dozen TV sets were showing the debate on the city's public broadcasting channel. Nick watched for a moment and then bought a universal remote control device, guaranteed to work with most any television set, VCR, or CD player.

He paused outside McGee's campaign headquarters where Marsha now had her eyes glued on the television screen above the door. Nick could barely see a reflection of it in one of the mirrored letters of Wilder McGee's name. He aimed at the reflection and pressed the Off button on the remote. The image on the TV screen dwindled to a tiny glowing point and then went out. Marsha scowled at the set and pressed her own remote control, turning it back on. Keeping out of sight in the shadows, Nick aimed at the reflection of the screen once more.

After four episodes of this, Marsha called out in frustration to the people working in the back room. They must have confirmed

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that their set was working perfectly because she gathered up her work and headed for the back room, leaving the door between ajar. Working quickly and silently, Nick ran a glass cutter in a semicircle on the pane next to the doorknob. He used a suction cup to remove the glass, then reached in to turn the knob and unlock the door. He crossed silently to the wall and untaped the bottom of the poster. Standing on a chair to release the top, he quickly rolled it into a cylinder.

He was out the door within a minute, just as the campaign workers in the back room gave a cheer at something their candidate had said.

The following morning, as distant church bells were tolling the ten o'clock hour, Nick Velvet walked into the midtown hotel suite where he'd arranged to meet Eric Saine and deliver the poster. The room had been booked for Tommy Folger and his wife, in town for the election, and when Nick arrived he saw that the young attorney was already present.

"Good to see you again, Nick," Folger told him, shaking hands. "Did you get the poster?"

"Last night. Is it safe to bring it in here?"

"We're waiting for it. Eric should arrive shortly."

Nick returned in a few minutes carrying a seven-foot length of PVC plastic pipe, the sort that might be used for plumbing repairs. "Where'd you have that?" Folger asked.

"In the service elevator. It was safe there for a few minutes. It's not the sort of thing anyone would steal."

"Except you," the lawyer said with a chuckle.

While Nick was pulling the rolled-up poster from inside its plastic pipe, the door to the suite's bedroom opened and a short young woman with frizzy brown hair came out. She was wearing tailored slacks and a sweater. "Hi, I'm Alex Folger, Tommy's wife. Pleased to meet you."

"A pleasure," Nick agreed, unrolling the poster and laying it on the carpeted floor.

"Go to work, Alex," her husband said. "It's all yours."

She took out a small magnifying glass of the type used by printers. Dropping to her knees on the carpet, she bent over and started examining the blown-up photograph of the mayor and his wife. She'd been at it for a couple of minutes when there was a knock on the door and Folger opened it for Eric Saine.

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The candidate entered, taking in the scene. "Hello, Velvet. Good work." Then to the woman on the floor, "What do you think, Alex?"

"Give me another minute."

Saine took off his jacket. "I feel good about this. I feel we're going to win this thing."

Alex Folger straightened up and got to her feet. "It's as I suspected from the smaller poster. Using this magnifier, I can see a definite hard edge all around the figure of Thelma McGee. I noticed a slight difference in the shadows first, and this confirms it. Here—take a look through this magnifier!"

Saine got down on the floor for a look. "She's right," he told Folger. "Your wife has a great eye for these things."

"I haven't spent twelve years in advertising production for nothing."

"What does all that mean?" Nick asked.

"It means you've earned the rest of your money," Eric Saine said, smiling broadly. "It means I can win the election. I can beat Wilder McGee on Tuesday!"

Alex Folger was more direct with her answer. "It means the picture of Thelma McGee was stripped from another negative. She wasn't at the stadium opening. She wasn't anywhere to be seen during the campaign. She's left him and he's keeping it a secret."

If Nick Velvet had been smart he'd have pocketed the money and caught the first flight back home. He'd finished the job for which he'd been paid, and whatever happened on Monday and Tuesday didn't concern him. The marital troubles of Mayor McGee and his wife certainly didn't concern him, nor did the plottings of Eric Saine and Tommy Folger.

But instead he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to challenge him on it, challenge him to produce her if he can." Saine seemed to take an unholy delight in the situation. "He's made plenty of hints and snide remarks about my bachelorhood during the campaign. Let's see if he can take it now. He's campaigning with a wife that no longer exists!"

"Well, she exists all right," Alex Folger quickly corrected. "We're not saying he killed her or anything like that. He's just hiding the fact that she's left him."

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Nick felt obliged to take up the defense. "Even if you're right about the photograph being a composite, there are other possible explanations. Her health could be one, or she might have some blemish on her face that she didn't want photographed."

"That could have been removed through retouching," Alex argued.

"Look," Nick said with a sigh, "before you all do something you'll regret, let me find out if Thelma McGee is at home. It should be easy enough to do and I won't charge you anything extra. Just call it part of my service."

"That's good of you, Nick," Tommy Folger agreed. He turned to the others. "What about it?"

The candidate was hesitant, his chilly eyes full of calculation. "I'm giving a radio interview tonight. I wanted to make the charge then. We have to get a mailing to the post office this afternoon if people are going to receive it tomorrow."

"Give me a deadline."

Saine turned to the other two. "What do you think?"

"How much time do you need for the mailing?" Folger asked his wife.

"The news release is already written. I was just waiting for verification about the poster. If we use the same release for the large mailing I'm ready to go with the push of a button. The release can be copied, folded, and inserted into envelopes within a couple of hours. It'll be at the post office before you go on the radio at eight o'clock." She turned her attention to Nick. "Get back to us by three o'clock."

"I'll be there."

"Not here," Folger decided. "Make it Eric's campaign headquarters at six fifty-four Center Street. It's just a couple of blocks away."

"I'll be there no later than three," Nick promised.

Shortly after noon he drove by the McGee house. It was in one of Cartwright's nicer neighborhoods, and a church down the block was just letting out after Sunday services. Nick parked his car and mingled with the crowd, strolling by the impressive white colonial where the mayor resided. He walked up the driveway and rang the bell. Wilder McGee himself answered, his gray hair seeming wind-tossed even in the house. Up close he looked around fifty.

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"Yes?" he said, a bit gruffly. "If you're press, I don't give interviews at my home."

"No, no," Nick soothed. "I'm from the Church of the Ascension down the street, Mr. Mayor. I wonder if I might speak with Mrs. McGee. It's about the annual rummage sale."

The mayor remembered to put on his best campaign smile. "My wife is indisposed at the moment, and we don't attend your church. However, I would be happy to make a small cash contribution—"

"We can't accept cash," Nick replied. "But if I could just speak to your wife—" As he spoke he'd edged himself into the foyer.

McGee's smile was fading. "I'm sorry. You'll have to leave. Thelma has been ill for several weeks."

Now that he was inside Nick could hear someone playing the piano from one of the other rooms. "Is that her I hear at the piano?"

"She likes to practice, but she can't be disturbed."

Even as Nick listened, she hit a wrong note and went back to correct it. "I hope we'll be seeing her at your victory rally."

"She'll be there. If you'll excuse me, I have to go out now. Leave your number and I'll have my wife phone you after the election."

Nick had no alternative. He made up a number out of his head as Mayor McGee jotted it down. Then he left the house and walked back the way he'd come. He had a feeling the man's eyes were on him all the time.

When he reached it, the rental car seemed just a bit different. The door on the passenger side wasn't quite flush with the rest of the body. It had been opened and not entirely closed. He was certain it hadn't been that way earlier. His body was tense as he opened the driver's-side door and slipped behind the steering wheel.

Instantly a firm arm encircled his throat. "I'm back, Nick. Remember me?"

He recognized Sam Creed's voice. Though his neck muscles strained against the headlock, he was helpless to break free. Creed's right arm was around his throat, using the seat's headrest for leverage. "Let—let me go!" he managed to gasp.

"Not until you tell me what you were doing at the mayor's house. I'm a friend of your dad's. I deserve to be cut in." But he loosened the headlock just a bit.

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"I'm just doing a favor for a friend. There's nothing to cut you in on!"

"Maybe the mayor will tell me. I do some work for him."

He let up the pressure suddenly and Nick started to relax too soon. Something struck the back of his head, driving him forward into the steering wheel, and then everything went black.

When Nick came to his senses it was a few minutes after three o'clock. He felt a lump on the back of his head and checked to see that his wallet was still in his pocket. At least Sam Creed was no common thief. Nick tested his eyesight for blurred vision but it seemed normal. He started the car and drove back downtown.

Tommy Folger was in his shirtsleeves, working the copy machine, when Nick walked into Saine's campaign headquarters. "Where were you, Nick? We had to go without you. It's after three."

"I know. I ran into someone who knew me. The important thing is that Thelma McGee is still there, at the mayor's house."

Folger's frown deepened. "Did you see her?"

"No, but I heard her playing the piano."

"It's too late. Alex has already faxed our release to the papers and the TV and radio stations. We're claiming she's disappeared and asking for an explanation."

Saine came out then to hear the news. "She was never very good on the piano. I suppose it was her all right."

"Do we send out a retraction?" Alex asked.

Saine thought about it. "No, Nick didn't see her. Maybe this is more trickery, like the photograph. If she's there he'll produce her tomorrow morning."

But all that Wilder McGee produced in the morning was a promise to make a televised statement that evening at six o'clock, just in time for the evening news.

Eric Saine was furious.

"We've got him cornered! He's going to admit it but he's waiting until the last possible moment, hoping her defection won't be enough to sway the voting. Damn!"

Nick had already decided he should remain in Cartwright until after the election. He was curious about the fate of Thelma McGee, and about the outcome of the election. More than that, he still had the bump on his head and he wanted to speak to

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Sam Creed about that. He phoned Gloria at Folger's office and told her he'd been delayed. He'd be home on Wednesday.

That evening, promptly at six P.M., Wilder McGee came on the radio and television and spoke to the city in a calm, controlled voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of the most difficult days of my life. As you may know by now, my opponent has chosen to make a campaign issue out of the absence of my wife Thelma from the scene. He accuses me of faking a photograph of us standing in front of the new stadium, a photograph that appears on my campaign posters and in our literature." He paused for an instant and then continued. "It is true that the picture in question is a composite, used because of my wife's illness at the time. I wish more than anything that Thelma could be seated here at my side right now. She cannot be. She is being treated at a nationally known clinic for a problem with alcohol abuse. I know all of our friends, and the good citizens of this city, will join me in praying for a speedy recovery. If I did wrong in keeping this fact of my personal life from the voters, I am sorry."

Nick did not watch the speech with Eric Saine and the others at his campaign headquarters. Instead he listened to it on the car radio and turned it off after the first two minutes. Then he walked quickly across the darkened lawn to the side of the mayor's house, searching for the spot where the telephone line entered through the siding. He took a small stun gun from his pocket and placed its metal prongs on the line, then fired an electric charge into it. The resulting power surge knocked out the home alarm system and its backup system, rendering them useless. He picked the lock on the side door and entered without difficulty.

He saw a light in the living room and heard the sound of a piano playing. Walking toward it, he could make out a grand piano in the parlor adjoining the living room. There was a tape recorder resting on top of it, playing a practice tape Thelma McGee must have recorded sometime in the past. He'd just turned it off when the parlor light went on and he saw Sam Creed. The ex-convict was pointing a gun at Nick's chest.

Nick smiled and said, "So you're working for the mayor tonight."

"I've been his bodyguard, off and on. He hired me last month."

"Mrs. McGee is dead, isn't she?"

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Sam Creed's face took on a sly expression. "What gives you that idea?"

"A feeling I've had. If she'd left him, if she'd gone to a clinic, he would have announced it at the beginning. The only secret that could really damage his reelection chances would be if she's dead and he somehow caused her death."

Creed didn't deny it. "I think that's why he hired me. He likes to have someone guarding the house when he's out at night. You got by the alarm system easily enough."

"You mean the body's still here?"

Creed motioned with the pistol. "I'm talking too much. I don't know what you're doing here, but I'm working for McGee and I could shoot you dead for breaking in."

"You already gave me a bump on the head. Wasn't that enough?"

"I'd have hit you harder if I wasn't a friend of your dad's."

Nick took a step closer. "Why don't you put down that gun? You're not going to shoot me."

Creed seemed to agree, and placed the weapon on top of the piano where the tape recorder had been. "Hell, I didn't know what I was getting into when I took this job. He didn't tell me until last night, but it happened back in September."

"McGee killed his wife?"

"More or less. She caught him in bed with a chick and went after them both with a butcher knife. The chick bopped her on the head with a lamp and killed her. She could probably have claimed self-defense."

"Except it was the beginning of an election campaign," Nick surmised. "The publicity alone would have defeated him, no matter what a grand jury decided."

"Yeah, that's what he figured."

"Where is the body?" Nick asked.

The ex-convict chuckled, finding some black humor in the situation. "They buried her in the garden out back! Can you imagine? And him the mayor of this burg!"

"He's on television right now saying she's in rehab for an alcohol problem. The press will discover quickly enough that he's lying."

"Not before the election," Creed countered. "Once he's reelected he'll blame everything on the chick and ride out the storm. In four years they'll have forgotten about it."

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"He'll still face charges of concealing a felony. He's an accessory after the fact."

"If she gets off on a self-defense plea there's no felony to be concealed. And even if she's convicted, he might be able to beat the accessory charge. We're in the wrong racket, Nick. Politics is where the power is."

"Get out of this while you can," Nick advised. "It may not work out exactly as Mayor McGee planned."

Campaign headquarters on election night brought back memories of Nick's youth and his uncle who'd run for office in their Greenwich Village neighborhood. Cartwright was no Greenwich Village but some things never change. There was still the high-school girl in spangled tights twirling a flaming baton while her mother watched proudly from the sidelines. There were still the politicians greeting him like an old friend, not even realizing he was a stranger in town. And there was the candidate, Eric Saine, off in a room by himself, checking the returns before his grand entrance.

"That business about faking the poster to hide the news about his wife must have had some effect," Alex Folger was saying. "Don't we have any better figures than these?"

Folger was busy on the telephone, getting reports from the polls that had just closed. Nick stood to one side, occasionally slipping out the door to the main room where the atmosphere was still hopeful.

But by ten o'clock they knew it was a lost cause. Mayor Wilder McGee had been reelected by a comfortable margin.

Nick Velvet slipped out the back door and walked quickly down the street to the hotel where McGee's victory celebration was just warming up. A band was playing something lively from the 1930s and the mayor was already working his way through the crowd to the podium. Nick was busy scanning the crowd, but he couldn't find the person he was looking for. Then he remembered the back room. Campaign headquarters always had a back room, especially on election night.

The young woman named Marsha was there, printing the latest vote totals off a computer screen. "Hello there," Nick said.

"Oh, hi! Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"You were on the desk when I stopped in the other day."

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"Yeah, I remember now. You wanted a poster." Then, as she spoke the words, it suddenly dawned on her. "Did you steal—?"

"That's in the past, Marsha. I came to talk about the future. Your future." Outside, the band struck up Wilder McGee's campaign song, playing an abbreviated version that ended with a flourish.

"What do you mean?" She looked worried now.

"You told me you saw Thelma McGee at the house last week and she looked better."

"That's true. The mayor didn't arrange to have her moved to the clinic until—"

"Marsha, Thelma McGee's been dead for more than a month. You buried her in the garden."

"Who the hell are you?" she asked angrily, rising to her feet.

Nick slipped the tape recorder from his pocket. "I just happened to be holding this during an interesting conversation at the McGee house last night."

He pushed the *play* button and the tape began at the spot he'd chosen. Sam Creed's voice came on. *"Once he's reelected he'll blame everything on the chick and ride out the storm."*

He left the tape recorder on the table in front of her and walked out of the room.

Nick figured that Marsha would confess everything to the police and offer to testify against Mayor McGee. He wanted a neat ending. On his way to the airport the following morning, he was reminded that life isn't always that neat. Before she called the police, Marsha killed Mayor McGee with a single gunshot in the living room of his home at three o'clock that morning. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 51

Chief Ketchum spoke briefly to his wife. When he hung up, the grin on his face broadened. "I knew that Encyclopedia would come in handy one day," he said. "The sample volume Harry Moss saw was Volume Sixteen. It's labeled 'CHICAGO-DEATH.'"

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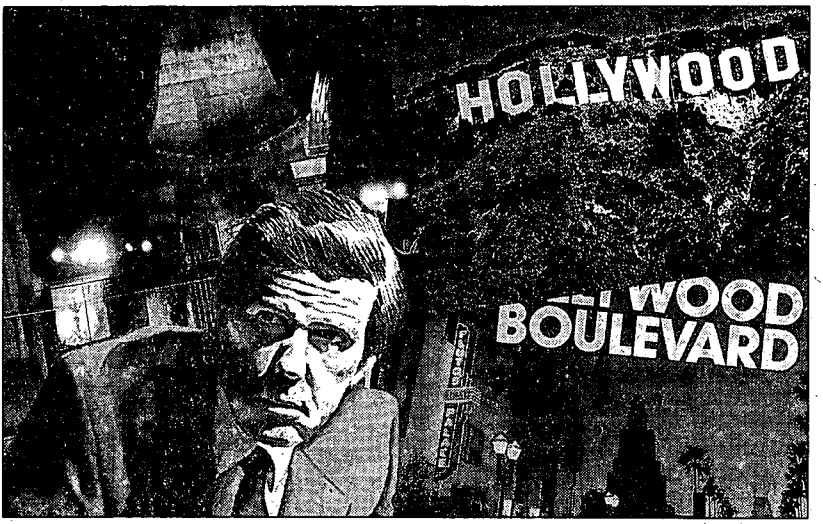

Art by Steve Cavallo

HITTER

by John Maddox Roberts

The way Sailor's system worked was, he never killed twice the same way. Not system, really, he thought of it as an art. It was a genuine creative challenge, figuring a completely new way to off someone every time out. Unlike so many of his colleagues, he was never going to leave an M.O. signature on his work. His favorite scene in all of movies was the bravura turn by Edward G. Robinson in *Double Indemnity* in which Robinson, in one take and apparently with only a single lungful of air, reels off every way a human being could possibly die in 1944.

Each method had to be tailored to the job, of course. For instance, he would never use a close-range shotgun blast on a classy, well-tailored lawyer, nor would he waste a silenced-.22-to-the-back-of-the-head on some skimming punk drug dealer. Each act had to be appropriate within the context of the role.

With firearms the possibilities were reasonably broad: Besides the shotgun, which could only be used one way, and the silenced

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.22, there was the multiple small-caliber fusillade, the single high-caliber shot, the long-range, scoped rifle sniper hit, the spray of automatic fire, and a few others. Once, Sailor had exited his mark with three handguns, each of a different caliber, causing investigators to declare that there had been three hitters.

Edged and pointed props yielded great variety: the neat stiletto stab, the messy razor slash, the multiple ice-pick puncture, the machete chop. The possibilities were great if not endless. A common kitchen knife left in the body gave the appearance of a domestic squabble turned violent. Because very few professional hitters used edged weapons anymore, police rarely suspected a hired job.

He had used a garrote twice, but this had not been repetition. The first time he had used a thick silk cord; the second, a strand of piano wire (D#) connected to two broom-handle toggles. The first was a well-known Sicilian favorite, while the second suggested a hitter trained as a commando, leading to suspicions of a deranged Vietnam vet of the sort made so familiar by films starring Bruce Dern.

Since Americans preferred to die in their cars above all other venues, Sailor lamented that his mechanical aptitude was so poor. Lethality in an automobile was chancy, anyway, and things like airbags didn't help, either. It was a shame, because the arranged accident was a wonderful exit. In Sailor's ideal roles, investigators never suspected foul play at all. He had studied poisons only to find them extremely difficult to administer unless the subject was an intimate. Sailor had few of those and no desire to exit any of them.

John Maddox Roberts is a professional author with more than thirty books to his credit. His first mystery novel, *SPQR*, was nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Paperback Original in 1991. The series it initiated, set in ancient Rome, is now up to six volumes, with a seventh on the way. Mr. Roberts's most recent novel, *A Typical American Town* (St. Martin's Press), has a contemporary setting, and has already been optioned for film. ¶

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Of course, there were times when the producers insisted on a public and messy denouement, *pour encourager les autres,* but Sailor always prized style and craftsmanship above special effects. An artist had to maintain his standards, after all.

On Tuesday mornings, Sailor always phoned his agent. He called from a pay phone in front of Lucky supermarket and he hung up after it rang four times. That meant Geraldine had another client in the office. He killed twenty minutes at the supermarket magazine rack with the latest *Premiere,* then tried again. It was picked up on the second ring.

"Blazing Talent Agency."

"Sailor. Any work for me?" Sailor, of course, was not his real name. It was his *nom de meurtre.*

"I think we have a role for you. Are you free for an audition?"

"When shall I come by?"

"One." Click.

Sailor hung up and got in his car. It was only eleven. That gave him time for a workout at the gym and sushi next-door before heading over to Studio City, where Geraldine's office was located. On the passenger seat next to him was a screenplay he'd been hustling around town for months. He was sure Spielberg would buy it, if he could just get close enough. Of course, there were Asian dictators more approachable than Spielberg.

He had a quick, violent workout with the weights and the heavy bag, then read the *L.A. Times* Calendar section over a leisurely lunch, idly wondering what Geraldine had lined up. He hoped it wasn't another dreary pusher or skimming accountant. He was tired of losers. He wanted something with style and flair, like maybe Mia would want to have Woody exited. Only he knew it was always unwise to deal with amateurs and Geraldine would probably never steer him that way.

He drove to Studio City, to an area where most of the windows had the signs of title companies, camera and lens rentals, sound mixing, editing, and a couple of dozen other businesses scuffling on the fringes of the film industry. As he pulled into a parking spot he burped horseradish fumes, so he took out an Altoid and sucked on it as he fed a quarter into the parking meter.

Geraldine's agency was on the second floor of a WWII-era office building. It had the prefab, ticky-tacky look endemic to that era when construction in the L.A. area was booming but

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quality construction material was in short supply. Sailor liked it. He found the seedy atmospherics congenial.

Inside was the inevitable waiting room stocked with trade magazines and framed photos of people you were almost sure you could recognize if you gave it a little thought. It was empty, but the long, expensive-when-new leather couch and matching chairs gave the impression that, at other hours, it could be crowded. He knocked on the office door.

"Come in." Geraldine was sitting behind the big teak desk. On top of it, next to the phone, was a Rolodex with which, if you laid it on its side, you could have played *Wheel of Fortune,* if you only had Pat and Vanna. Sailor was no Pat and Geraldine was certainly no Vanna. Her beautifully tailored business suit did what it could for her dumpy body but it wasn't much. She had her graying hair pulled back tightly, and her eyes glittered through the almond lenses of a pair of glasses that looked like something from a John Waters Baltimore special. He took the chair across from her.

"What do you have for me?"

"Something just right for you, I think. It's just the sort of role you like."

Sailor was intrigued. Geraldine never jerked him around. For one thing, she lacked a sense of humor. She swiveled in her chair and pulled open a file drawer. The folder she pulled out was a thin one, but then they always were. How much of a file did you need, anyway? Sailor never trusted other people's work in any case. He always researched his own roles. He was a method hitter.

He opened the folder and studied the eight-by-ten color glossies that lay on top of a couple of sheets of typing paper. He was a little shocked to see that it was a woman; not that he was sexist or anything, but this made it an unusual role, and he might need to do some deep character study before he could get comfortable with it.

Her face was classically heart-shaped, with high tilted cheekbones that tilted in turn the enormous green eyes above them. The nose was small, not quite snubbed, the mouth very wide and full-lipped, the chin small and pointed. The hair was a blond cap that fitted the elegant head sleekly and came down only to the angle of her jaw. Sailor guessed that she used her hair as a

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frame rather than as an adornment, emphasizing her best feature.

"Looks familiar," he said.

"You've probably seen her in some of the soaps. In the early eighties she did some film work, had a nonspeaking part in the second *Star Trek* movie, then small parts in some of the prime-time series, never a regular character. Lately she's done a lot of commercials for Mexican television. You know how they love blondes down there."

Sailor nodded. It was about a standard career. A woman who was an absolute knockout in East Cowpat usually found she didn't exactly set Hollywood sizzling. Not in the town where Greta Garbo looks got you a job at the lingerie counter at I. Magnin, until you got edged out by the one with the Liz Taylor looks *and* the Julia Roberts smile. If that big break didn't come along in the first four or five years, it wasn't going to. For a woman, twenty-five was over the hill in this town. It was worse than professional sports.

The second photo was full-length. It had been taken a few years ago, to judge by the hairstyle, a teased mane now retained only by Candice Bergen. She wore an emerald gown with mesh sleeves and a narrow V of neckline that plunged to her navel. It looked like it had been taken at an Oscar ceremony. She was on the arm of some guy whose face wasn't in the picture. The men were in tuxes and the women in flamboyant designer bizarreries. Nobody was looking at her because way in the back an out-of-focus Cher was coming through a doorway, attached to an adolescent.

The third picture had been taken by a swimming pool. Her hair was short again, dark with water. She was wearing a one-piece suit cut waist-high on the sides and revealing the classic starlet build: petite and slender, but with long legs and large breasts. It was what Sailor thought of as the Janet Leigh somatotype. He studied the pictures for signs of surgery or other telltales, but couldn't find any.

The typed pages gave her name as Laura Shayne, nee Irma Perkins. She was thirty-five years old, lived alone in Pasadena, drove a six-year-old Camaro. There followed a list of her professional credits and places she had worked to support herself while trying to get media work, her bank, schools she'd attended, all the background stuff that private investigators used as padding

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to look like they were earning their pay. Sailor skimmed over the stuff about her hours and habits. He'd do his own research on that.

"Well?" Geraldine said. "Will you take it?"

"I'll do an audition," he said.

"Why not just take the role? It's been awhile since you've worked."

"I have to feel right about it, Geraldine. I mean, is it really *me?* I need to be comfortable in a role."

"Is it because she's a woman?"

"You know better than that. I'm a professional. But this is my art and I have to be true to my instincts."

"You're such an *auteur*. Go ahead with your audition. Don't be too long."

"Any response on *Pale Moon?*"

"I've got it with a producer at Disney."

"Disney? It's an incest-infanticide-necrophilia story. I was thinking more like Romero, maybe Dante."

"Disney's branching out. You'd be amazed."

"What about my new one? It's perfect for Spielberg."

"I'm doing what I can. But with Steve, you stack up all the screenplays that get pushed on him and stand on top of them, you die of oxygen starvation."

Sailor got up and went to the door, then turned, holding up the file. "Why her?"

"Now who's the professional? I don't ask and neither do you. See you, Sailor."

He got in the car and put the folder on the seat beside him, on top of the screenplay. He hadn't sold one, but he kept trying. It was his passion, and it was also a good cover. Nothing could be more low-profile, because in L.A. would-be screenwriters were somewhat more numerous than supermarket baggers.

Traffic wasn't too bad on the Ventura freeway as he drove east toward Pasadena. He wondered about that. A Pasadena address didn't do much for your credibility in the entertainment business. Maybe she'd given up trying. He wondered about the woman generally. She seemed to have plenty going for her in the visuals department. Her list of credentials showed she'd had the opportunity to make plenty of contacts. What had she gotten herself into?

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These were not good thoughts and he tried to shake them off. They were irrelevant to the role at hand. What he had to determine were things like habits and movements. The past was important only as it affected the present.

The house was in a block just off the road that led to La Canada, in an area developed right after the war for returning servicemen taking up their GI housing loans; mostly modest one- and two-bedroom bungalows in the usual Southern California mix of styles. There were a hundred other developments just like it in the greater L.A. area, but this one was more pleasant than most, with plenty of mature trees providing shade, luxuriant gardens, and the old-fashioned, fluted, *faux*-bronze lampposts you still saw in some older parts of the city.

He drove past her house, a tile-roofed stucco with one bay window in front. There was no Camaro under the carport. He drove another block and parked, got out and began walking, taking it easy, no particular aim. He didn't go back toward her house, just ambled around several blocks, taking it in. The place had the rare, blissful air of a low-crime district. The nearest gang activity was on the other side of the Chavez Ravine and down in South Pasadena. Here it was all jacarandas, bird of paradise plants, and kids on bicycles. There were still a few older two-story houses, clapboard or shingle, with big grounds planted with fruit trees: remnants of a time when this had been farmland.

He walked back to his car, content. This was as close to Middle America as the L.A. area got. A little cosmopolitan for Capra, maybe, but just the kind of nostalgia trip Boomers loved. He wondered why she lived here. He'd been in the neighborhood for an hour, not long enough to attract anyone's attention. He put the car in gear and drove past her house again. Still no Camaro.

He cruised by at seven that evening, then again at ten. Both times the Camaro was in the carport.

For the next week he researched her, driving by her home several times each day in a succession of rental cars, noting the times the Camaro was or wasn't in the carport. When he wasn't doing that he was building his background. He got her professional records through a contact in the Screen Actors Guild. Armed with this, he went to the library and the specialty book and magazine stores to track down any publication that might have pictures of Laura Shayne. He was good at this work and

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he did it efficiently, finding the pictures without difficulty and razoring them out without attracting the slightest notice from clerks or librarians.

With pictures and clippings he almost covered the large bulletin board in his home office. It was amazing how much print even a very minor figure could garner over a dozen years. He had her face from a couple of dozen angles, Laura variously costumed, Laura with a number of well-known actors.

From her SAG files he learned that she had been with the Maury Spielman Agency. Spielman had been one of the oldest agents in the business, dating from the late forties. He had been big in the fifties and sixties, but toward the end he had been down to a handful of clients, washed up in a mercilessly competitive business. He had died about six months ago, mired in Chapter Eleven. And Laura had been with Spielman. How sad.

The fourth night he saw the Camaro in the carport, but all the lights were out. Two doors down on the other side of the street was another dark house with two newspapers on the porch. He parked in front of it and sank down to dashboard level. He had his night-vision goggles ready but he didn't think they would be necessary. One of the old lampposts stood directly in front of her house and her porch light was on.

At 11:30 a massive, new-model Lincoln pulled up in Laura's driveway. It was black and the windows looked like slabs of obsidian. Sailor's first thought was: *What the hell?*

A minute later the driver jumped out and opened the right rear door and Laura got out while somebody else got out the other side. He was a big guy in an expensive suit and he walked her up to the door while the driver got back behind the wheel. While Laura did the looking-for-keys-in-purse routine, Sailor studied the guy in the porch light. Things started to click when he recognized him.

It was Laurence Bruce, a new producer with contacts and money to throw around. But Sailor knew he had started out as Lorenzo d'Abruzzi, a Philly mob guy come west to be respectable. Sailor shook his head. They'd been doing that since Benny Siegel. So the producer *was* a producer. Had to be.

So why? he wondered as the two went inside. Maybe a number of things, the most likely being she pulled some sort of blackmail scam on him. But maybe Mrs. Bruce was complaining about her, or maybe he was just tired of her. It wasn't like there had to be

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some justification of cosmic significance. These people didn't have to account for their actions to Congress or anything.

An hour later Bruce came out, straightening his necktie. He got into his limo and it drove away. Sailor drove off a minute later. Back in his office he studied his Laura file for any connection to Bruce. He couldn't find her in any productions Bruce was involved with, but that didn't mean much. Bruce had only been in town a couple of years. But he liked this. His bulletin board was beginning to look like a real storyboard.

Her Camaro had never been there between 9:00 A.M. and 6:00 P.M., so the day he decided on to make contact he was almost in front of her house at 6:30, his hood up and bending over his engine, when she drove up. She got out of her car, a sack of groceries in her arms with *Von's* printed on the brown paper.

Sailor straightened from beneath the hood and did a Moe Howard double take. "Excuse me, miss?" he said, tentatively.

She paused warily. "Yes?"

"Maybe I'm way off base here, but are you Laura Shayne?"

She smiled the way they always did when they were recognized and hadn't expected to be. "Yes, I am." She stood there, less wary now, but holding her groceries close, still unsure.

He grinned like a star-struck kid. "I can't believe this! I lose a distributor wire and it's right in front of Laura Shayne's house! I love your work. I don't know why they didn't make you a regular on *Designing Women*. You really brought that character to life. Same with *Hill Street.*"

She smiled even wider. "Why, thank you. I don't know, I thought those parts would be big breaks myself. But that's all in the hands of the producers, and they can be hard to deal with."

"Yeah, I know. I've been trying to sell a screenplay for years, but no one's called me back yet." He laughed ruefully. "Don't worry, I won't ask you to look at my latest."

"I guess you've learned by now that nobody listens to actors anyway."

He shook his head vehemently. "No! That's not what I meant. I just thought you must get a lot of people pushing screenplays on you. I wouldn't want to bother you."

She unbent a little. "Do you need to use my phone? About your car?"

He looked back at it, like it might have gone someplace or something. "Oh no. I got that fixed just as you drove up. It was

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He grinned. "You know how it works: You never go anywhere without your screenplay."

"Well, I won't make any promises, but I know some people. I've just met a high-powered new producer and he's interested in helping my career. You never know."

"Just wait right here!" He went out to the rental car and got the screenplay from the front seat. It was one he'd written a couple of years ago and he'd made up a new title page with the Ashcroft name and a fake Screenwriter's Guild stamp, then he'd taken it to a photocopy place to get a new copy made with no prints on it. The binder had a pebbly surface that wouldn't hold prints. He didn't think it would ever leave her house but it paid to be careful in his line of work.

"I'll show it around. You never know."

"Yeah, you never know. Oh, here's my phone number." He handed her a card with the Mike Ashcroft name. The number was one he changed monthly and it connected to an answering machine at a service run by a very reputable and well-connected bookie named Manny who was wire man by appointment to the L.A. mob.

"Look, Miss Shayne, I've taken up too much of your time and you have to get to your reading."

"No, it's been a pleasure. And I hope you make a success of writing, even if it turns out I can't help you." She gave him directions to Cal Tech. Then, after hesitating a moment, she rummaged in her purse and came up with a card. It had her name in ornate, romantic script and it said she was with the Maury Spielman Agency. On the back she wrote a phone number.

"Here. Don't let this get around. That's my home number, and I try not to give it out too much."

"I really appreciate this, and don't worry, I'm not going to make a lot of harassing calls."

"Oh, I know that. I've met plenty of freaks in this business, and I can tell you're not one of them."

He drove off feeling that this one was something special.

The next day he went to Geraldine's office. "I'll take it," he said, sinking into the chair opposite her.

"It took you long enough." Light slanted through the Venetian blinds and made shiny oval discs of her glasses. The blinds had to be forty years old. All the desk needed, he thought, was an

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nothing, just a loose wire. Thanks for the offer, though."

That seemed to put her at ease, this turning down an offer to come in. "Well, why don't you come in? I have to go back out in about twenty minutes for a reading, but I have some iced tea in the fridge, if you'd like."

"Well . . ." he said, flabbergasted, ". . . well, sure! I really appreciate this!" He was feeling even sorrier for her. She definitely didn't get recognized very often. He held the groceries for her while she got the door unlocked and they went inside. She let him through first and she left the door wide open behind her. She was no dummy.

He looked around the living room while she got the iced tea. "I wouldn't have thought you'd live in Pasadena. I mean, this is a nice place, but I would've thought Bel Air, Malibu, someplace like that." There were some good pictures of her on the wall with some famous people. None of Bruce.

She came out of the kitchen with the tea. "When I win my first Emmy I'll think about a place in Malibu. I live here because I inherited this house from my mother. Having a place that's fully paid up leaves your mind free for better things than rent or house payments."

He accepted the tea, carefully noting a tiny chip on the base of the glass, in case he had to wipe his prints off it later. "I can see how that'd be an advantage. And this is a good area, too, even if people think it's a little stodgy."

"I like it. And it's only about twenty minutes to a half-hour to get to most of the studios, when the traffic's light."

He liked the way she maintained a front, like she got so much work that being handy to the studios was a real consideration for her. "That's convenient."

She studied him a minute, then, "You haven't told me your name."

"I haven't? It's Mike. Mike Ashcroft. I live in Culver City." It was a name he'd used before. He had some ID to go with it.

"What brings you to Pasadena?"

"I came to do some research at Cal Tech, but I took a wrong turn and got lost. I think I was headed back in the right direction when I lost that wire."

"I can give you directions." She paused for a beat. "Mike, do you happen to have a copy of your screenplay with you?"

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overflowing ashtray, but you hardly ever saw those anymore.

"You know how thoroughly I like to prepare."

She sighed. "I do. I suppose your home is full of her pictures and press clippings?"

"That's how I do it. I need to submerge myself in the role."

"You sound like her biggest fan."

"I should be. I like her."

"Sailor, I'm your agent, not your shrink."

He spread his hands. "This is going to be a first-class production, Geraldine. She's going to get the sort of attention she should've had all along."

Geraldine rolled her eyes up. "Spare me the details, Sailor. I just need to know when."

He frowned. "I don't like to be held to a schedule, you know that."

She leaned over the desk. "Sailor, we're dealing here with a very important person who knows the importance of being careful. He needs to be someplace, with witnesses, when this happens."

It burned him, but under the circumstances, it was a legitimate request. He thought for a while, tossing scenarios around. "One week."

"Can't you do it sooner?"

"No. It has to be done this way."

"What a prima donna. Okay, then, I'll tell him. Morning, night, what? He'll have to know."

"Night. Between nine and eleven."

The reason he needed a week was he didn't want to call her back too soon. If he called back right away she'd think he really was a freak out to harass her, and that would put her on her guard. He figured a week wouldn't make her suspicious.

He almost hated to do this one, but after giving it much deep thought, he concluded that it was for the best. She'd had potential, but her career wasn't going anywhere. It was make-or-break time and maybe one in a thousand hit it big after working at it so long. These were the days of instant stardom and equally swift oblivion. Aging in obscurity was a terrible fate for a woman like that. Why not go out in a blaze of publicity, with her picture in all the papers and her name on the lips of network anchors?

It was for the best. Tragic, yes, but tragedy was the oldest of the dramatic arts, from the *tragōidia*, the goat song of ancient Greece. It was fitting.

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Sailor didn't own any weapons, never kept one in his house. He always acquired whatever props he needed for each role and, if they were not to be left at the scene, he disposed of them immediately afterward. A collection of exotic hardware, while not unthinkable in an aspiring screenwriter, could arouse unwanted curiosity among his neighbors, all of whom knew him as a polite, peaceful man, sensitive and artistic.

First he had to determine a method. It had to be something he had never done before, in keeping with his artistic policy. It had to be uncommon and have terrific camera appeal. It had to be something that would give Laura the sort of media coverage she deserved and other struggling actresses would drool over.

So guns were out. Not only did they lack any aesthetic appeal whatever, they were so commonplace that someone who choked on crackers and Brie got more attention than someone who was shot. Blunt instruments were too plebeian and strangulation distorted the features grotesquely.

He toyed briefly with setting up a satanic ritual sacrifice scene, but that sort of thing was hokey and passé now: a once dramatic concept gone crass and low-budget through excessive imitation.

Finally he settled on something that was simple, elegant, quick, and also left a spectacular scene for the cameras.

He bought a sword in a martial arts supply shop in San Diego, driving there in another rental car, wearing a wig and fake glasses and contacts that altered the color of his eyes. He also purchased a zippered carrying case for it and the clerk barely glanced at him as he paid for them. The things were sold by the thousands to martial arts enthusiasts all over the country, although they seldom got used for anything except demonstration drills or, more often, just hanging on the wall.

At a cutlery shop he picked up a pair of whetstones: hard Arkansas and soft Arkansas, and a bottle of honing oil. Then he went home. The blade had a rudimentary edge, and with his honing gear and about an hour of effort, he improved this until it was razor-keen for its whole length. It was not of high-quality steel, but it wasn't like he was going to be hacking his way through an army of samurai. In fact, a sharpened piece of scrap iron would do the job, but he wanted something exotic that he could leave at the scene. When he was satisfied with the edge, he wiped the blade and guard carefully and resheathed it. The

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handle was wrapped with braided nylon cord masquerading as silk, and would not retain fingerprints.

The weapon had several sterling virtues. First, he'd never used a sword before. Second, it would leave a spectacularly messy and memorable scene, one that would sear itself into the consciousness of the most jaded media reporters. Third, America was full of dangerous, role-playing psychos whose grip on reality was at best tentative. Approximately half of these wore camouflage fatigues, thought of themselves as survivalists, collected firearms, owned oversized knives with sawteeth on the back, and subscribed to *Soldier of Fortune*. The other half were ninjas in their dreams, wore black pajamas and masks, owned fake Japanese swords made in Taiwan, and subscribed to *Black Belt*. Investigators would probably assume the perp to be one of the latter, possibly a deranged fan with a rich fantasy life.

It was a Monday, and she had been home by 9:00 each Monday night so far, but he drove by her house at 9:30 to make sure. The Camaro was in the carport, the lights were on. He drove to a convenience store in La Canada and called her from the pay phone.

"Hello?"

"Miss Shayne? This is Mike Ashcroft. We met last week and I left my screenplay with you?"

"Oh yes. Uh, Mike, I really haven't had a chance to show it to that producer yet. You can't rush these things, you know. You have to wait for the right moment."

He laughed. "Oh, I know that! Listen, this is just what I wanted to hear. Last night I was at a party in Pacific Palisades and I met a lady who's in the script department at Fox. She wants to look at my screenplay and I don't have a copy. I spent all day trying to track down the other copies I have out and I couldn't locate a single one! You were my last chance."

"Oh. Well, that sounds promising. When do you want to pick it up?"

"I'm calling from home. I hate to bother you at this time of night, but if I leave now I can be there in thirty minutes if the traffic is light, and it usually is by this time. If it's too late I can come tomorrow, it's just that I want to grab this one while she's still interested."

"I understand. No bother, just come on over."

"Thanks, Miss Shayne," he said fervently. "You're a lifesaver."

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He waited fifteen minutes, then drove back and cruised the neighborhood, noting all the parked cars and anything else that might turn out to be important later. There were no road blockages anywhere in case he had to take a different route from the one he'd planned. People had gone to prison for overlooking things like that. He parked the car, one he'd rented with the fake Ashcroft ID, just out of the pool of light cast by the street lamp.

For the final time he mentally rehearsed the sequence: make his entrance, perform the role, dress the set, get the screenplay and the card, find the glass with the chip out of the bottom and wipe it for prints, just in case, and leave. He allotted himself four minutes, five tops. No noise loud enough to rouse the neighbors. The only tricky point might be the card, but it was almost certainly with the screenplay or in her purse. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was ready for his performance.

He picked up the zippered case and got out of the car, which he planned to wipe for prints and abandon somewhere in Chinatown. He walked across the lawn, avoiding the light, and leaned the cased sword against the wall next to the door, where it would be out of immediate sight. Then he rang the doorbell and took a step backward in good display of peephole etiquette.

A few seconds later the door opened and she smiled at him. "Hello, Mike. I have it ready for you. Come on in."

This was a stroke of luck. He had been afraid she would bring it to the door. Then he would have had to push her back inside and that would have been undignified. He picked up the sword by its case and followed her, closing the door silently behind him.

"I hope this is the break you've been waiting for, Mike." Just past her he saw the screenplay on the coffee table, propped up a little by something under it, so he could see the card he'd given her paper-clipped to one corner of the cover. Excellent. One less item to look for afterward.

Her back to him, she bent over to get the screenplay and he unzipped the top end of the case and drew out the long, gleaming sword. Dropping the case and sheath, he raised the sword high, the ten-inch handle gripped in both his hands, and arranged his face in his best homicidal lunatic expression. She turned around, holding the screenplay close in front of her body, and froze, her face a mask of terror at the demented spectacle he presented.

Usually they stayed frozen long enough for him to complete the role quietly. Most people are not accustomed to sudden vio-

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lence, are unprepared for it, don't know how to react, and can't really believe that it's happening to them, anyway. Not Laura. She let out a scream, and it was a good one: a real, old-fashioned starlet scream, one Fay Wray would have been proud of. Sailor wondered how in hell she could have hauled so much air into her lungs so quickly. No time for niceties now. He lunged for her.

Before he covered half the distance she dropped the screenplay, fully extended her arm, and shot him five times with the little nickel-plated revolver she had been holding in her other hand. The pops didn't sound nearly as loud as her scream had, but the bullets made five holes in his chest in a group that could have been covered by a standard bar coaster.

Sailor collapsed on the floor with the sword still in his hands. Its very tip made a tiny nick on Laura's ankle but she didn't notice that at the time. She stood there for a few seconds and the revolver dropped from her trembling fingers, making a faint clank when it struck the sword blade. Then, a little shaky with reaction, she walked over to the telephone table and sat down by it. She took several deep breaths before picking up her phone. She knew she had a few minutes. Her neighbors would be cautious about investigating an outburst like that.

When she knew her voice was fully under control, she pushed one of the automatic dial buttons on the box next to the cradle. The phone on the other end was picked up at the first ring.

"Geraldine?" Laura said. "I just got my big break."

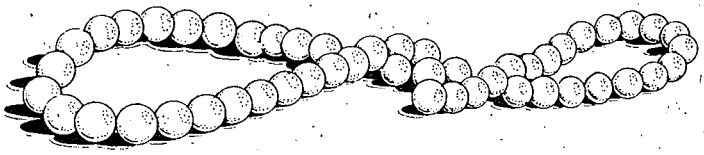
"Everything okay?"

"Perfect. I'm going to call the police now."

"Do that. Remember, be hysterical but coherent when you do, but be brave and composed by the time the camera crews get there. I'll get there before they arrive, make sure they shoot you from good angles."

"Do you think I'll get to audition for Spielberg now?"

"Steve's a little iffy. Scorsese for sure. Maybe Coppola. You're on your way, kid." ●



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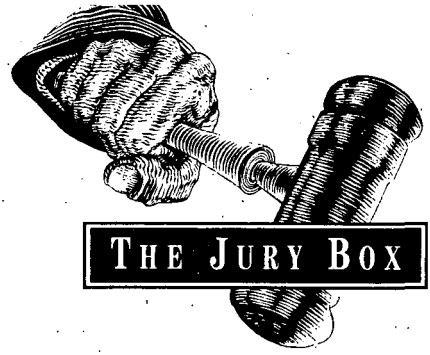

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

There are so many historical mysteries being published, a monthly column could devote itself to them alone with no danger of running out of material. More and more periods and locales are represented: the Ancient Rome of Lindsey Davis and Steven Saylor; the medieval England of Ellis Peters and P.C. Doherty; the Elizabethan times of Leonard Tourney and Edward Marston; the Colonial America of the Maan Meyers team and Robert Lee Hall; the Victorian period of Anne Perry and Peter Lovesey; the 19th-century America of recent bestsellers by Caleb Carr and E.L. Doctorow; the turn-of-the-century Egypt of Elizabeth Peters's Amanda Peabody novels; and the recent American past of authors like Stuart Kaminsky and Loren D. Estleman. The variety of historicals on the market is illustrated in the first four books considered below.

**** Kate Ross: *Whom the Gods Love,* Viking, $19.95. In his third recorded case, Julian Kestrel, detecting dandy of Regency London, is asked by barrister Sir Malcolm Falkland to discover the murderer of his son. Warning the bereaved father of the possibility of unwelcome revelations, Julian takes the case and along the way gives himself (via a wager with a rival dandy) a deadline for solving it. With a sleuth closer than most to the Great Detective model and the provision of plentiful fair-play clues, the author is a throwback to the Golden Age of the twenties and thirties. Style and characterization are not stinted, nor is a well-researched evocation of the time, but puzzle-spinning is the name of the game and few contemporary writers do it

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as well as Kate Ross.

**** Steven Saylor: *The Venus Throw,* St. Martin's, $22.95. The fourth book-length case for Gordianus the Finder, private eye of ancient Rome, is another astonishing performance, with a strong sense of time and place and a terrific final surprise. In the opening sequence, philosopher and Egyptian ambassador Dio, fearing for his life, comes to visit his old pupil Gordianus dressed in drag and accompanied by a eunuch priest of Cybele. Though Gordianus turns down the case, he eventually solves Dio's subsequent murder. A Roman trial, with Cicero in fine form defending Marcus Caelius, is one of the novel's highlights.

**** Max Allan Collins: *Blood and Thunder,* Dutton, $21.95. Chicago private eye Nate Heller was apparently on the scene for every major 20th-century crime—I wouldn't be surprised to learn in some future novel he was in Dallas on November 22, 1963. This account, though, concerns the 1935 assassination of Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, and the investigation shows some parallels with the JFK case: an alleged "lone nut" assassin who is too dead to speak for himself and questions involving entry and exit wounds. This is one of the best Hellers, sticking close to the historical record while providing a fresh theory of who was really behind the Long killing. (As usual, Collins provides a concluding bibliographic essay that meticulously sorts out the fact from the fiction.)

*** Walter Satterthwait: *Escapade,* St. Martin's, $22.95. While Collins puts a fictional detective among real historical figures, Satterthwait takes the opposite approach of using real people, Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to investigate a purely fanciful crime, the murder of an eccentric baronet during a 1921 English house party. This novel doesn't end quite as well as it begins—for one thing, the locked-room solution is a fizzle—but the author, strong on style and wit, appears to be having such a wonderful time, the reader is bound to join him. Narrator Phil Beaumont, the Pinkerton man serving as Houdini's bodyguard, and Scotland Yard's Shakespeare-quoting Inspector Marsh are very thinly disguised versions of famous fictional sleuths.

*** E.X. Ferrars: *A Hobby of Murder,* Doubleday, $18.95. I'm not sure whether this novel, published in Britain in 1994, is the last from Ferrars, who died in March at age 87,

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ending a mystery writing career of some 55 years. Several years ago I wrote in these pages that she was the author "closest to Christie in style, plotting, and general milieu"—that frequently quoted statement certainly applies to this account of retired professor Andrew Basnett's investigation of the poisoning at a village dinner party of a well-known crime novelist. In fact, octogenarian Ferrars was superior to octogenarian Christie, bamboozling the reader with a tricky variation on the Least-Suspected-Person solution that is undeniably clever whether you believe it or not.

** Gillian Roberts: *In the Dead of Summer,* Ballantine, $21. English teacher and amateur sleuth Amanda Pepper becomes involved in the lives of her summer school students, more diverse than the usual lot at Philly Prep. The downbeat subject matter of youth at risk is sensitively handled and relieved by the author's customary humor, but the novel is a bit overlong and ultimately simplistic in its treatment of contemporary social issues. (If I were a conservative looking for excuses to decry fuzzy-minded liberalism, which I am not, this is the kind of book I would use as an exhibit.)

** Michael A. Kahn: *Due Diligence,* Dutton, $20.95. The latest novel about St. Louis lawyer Rachel Gold, featuring a Paretsky-style plot of finagling in the pharmaceutical business, has a dandy opening chapter and more interesting lore about its under-utilized locale. On the downside, it is unconscionably padded, including excessive repetition of the list of names that provides the main clue and the list of questions left by the first victim; it includes in the cast a liberal Presidential hopeful who is too good to be true; and it shows ominous signs of creeping blockbuster schlock in a contrived and unnecessary menace scene midway, based on some idiot-heroine behavior by Rachel, and a final confrontation scene that is corny as all-get-out.

The Crown Crime Companion (Crown Trade Paperbacks, $12), in which a poll of the Mystery Writers of America attempts to isolate the "Top 100 Mystery Novels of All Time," offers the neophyte a reading list of genre highspots and the fan an opportunity for heated argument. Contributing to the pleasure are Otto Penzler's expert annotations and essays on various subgenres by such writers as Mary Higgins Clark, Sue Grafton, and Scott Turow.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

RECKLESS MERCY

by Jim Allyn

"Investigation by negotiation is a lot of bull," Jim Howard said. "I have no authority or resources except what the local cops choose to give me. It's like trying to sprint under water."

Assistant Attorney General Bob Mastrofski, State of Missouri, was unmoved. "Can't be helped. From time to time Jefferson City finds it necessary to 'unofficially' loan out our most experienced investigators. No legal way to force the issue on the local authorities. Has to be cooperative."

"Funny how these unofficial loans of personnel are always made to big contributors to the governor's war chest," Howard said.

"A truly blinding revelation," Mastrofski observed, opening a dark green folder on his desk. "That's the type of penetrating insight that makes you so good at your job, I suppose. The person asking for our help is Ida Grant. Old money, very low profile."

"Never heard of her."

"Could be you move in different circles. She's an extremely sophisticated lady. Practically owns Reed City."

Born in Michigan, Jim Allyn now resides in Evanston, Illinois, where he works as Director of Public Relations and Marketing for St. Francis Hospital. His new story for us, his second fiction publication, examines the balance between justice and mercy. Mr. Allyn has a good feel for conflict, emotional and physical, and his story raises some questions you'll want to turn over.

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"Never heard of Reed City, either."

"Little town of about ten thousand. Mrs. Grant's daughter Evelyn was murdered there late Wednesday night or early Thursday morning. Neck broke, probably raped."

"Probably raped?"

"No lab there. Nearest good one is Springfield. We're having the body sent there tomorrow."

"What's the holdup?"

Mastrofski shifted uncomfortably. "Mrs. Grant wanted to have a wake at her country estate. We've obliged her. Evelyn was her only child."

"As if that matters," Howard groaned. "You guys, honest to God. You're violating every standard practice for handling bodies. Did you tell her that breaking with procedure weakens our case in court? The whole thing could get thrown out."

Mastrofski flashed an odd little smile. "We're not worried about that. Facts are these: About nine A.M. Mrs. Grant returns from a trip and stops by her daughter's apartment. Finds her naked on the living-room floor. No forced entry, nothing stolen. She apparently let the killer in late at night, so she must have known him well. In a small pond like Reed City, the list of suspects narrows down incredibly fast. Best bets are her ex-lover, a twenty-seven-year-old musician named Curtis Knox, or her current, a retired Marine major named Sam Finn."

"Was she beat up?"

"No. Looks like her neck was broken from one swing or twist or push. Perhaps deliberate, perhaps not."

"Difficult to rape someone by accident, though. Maybe they had consensual sex and quarreled afterwards. Marines know how to kill with one blow."

"Especially this one. I talked to the records people in San Diego and they're sending his service jacket. Two tours in Nam. Wheelbarrow full of decorations. Seventeen confirmed personal kills, really high for an officer. Likes action."

"And young women."

"Apparently she was the aggressor. Dumped the musician for the major, it seems."

"Okay, so there's a classic motive. But I'll go with a history of violence every time. This major's talents ever spill over into off-duty civilian trouble?"

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"No, but he's walked the edge in the combat zone. Ears missing from the enemy, sometimes live captured ones. Prisoners accidentally falling from choppers. Stuff like that."

"And since he retired?"

"Clean as a whistle. He's forty-nine, settled in Reed City to write a book paid for by some military historical society and to take long walks in the country. Then our princess falls hard for him—an aging outsider, no less—and dumps a local hero, much to the outraged sensibilities of the townsfolk. He's being harassed by the sheriff. Mrs. Grant wants it stopped. She wants things handled quietly and quickly. Your job is to make sure that happens. The sheriff can't believe a hometown boy could do something like this, so he's going after the major."

"He has a point, given this guy's war record. Got anything on the musician?"

"Nothing much. Got his own band, just local stuff. Sold some lyrics to Waylon once. One assault—routine bar fight. That's it. Nothing that indicates he's capable of murder. Of course, anybody's capable of one wild swing. Hit my own wife once. Couldn't believe it."

"I can. She's a lot smaller than you."

Mastrofski slowly replaced the papers in the folder and handed it to Howard. "Anything else you need before you get started?"

"I won't accept responsibility for playing fast and loose with the body. I won't sign anything. I won't tell the transport people what to do. I want no part of it."

"No problem. We've kept it under constant surveillance; it's never been out of our control."

"Do you know how fast evidentiary traces of tissue degenerate under uncontrolled conditions?"

Mastrofski smiled oddly once again. "Ida Grant doesn't want this case solved, she just wants it over."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Mastrofski ignored him. "The sheriff's name is Rusty Porter. I'll call you with the lab results and send the rest of the Marine stuff by messenger. Fast and courteous, Howard. The governor wants to keep Ida Grant on his side."

Only seven cars; it was a very private wake. Howard spotted the Springfield ambulance parked discreetly beside the barnlike

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garage. The Grant estate was impressive. Rolling, meticulously maintained lawns; tall, weathered oaks; scattered oases of flowers. Splashed in bright white paint accented with dark green trim, the wood-framed mansion and its spawn of smaller buildings had a distinctly antebellum look.

Howard climbed out of the car and into the high, haunting strains of a solitary violin. Escaping through the open windows of the mansion, the music filled the courtyard like sweet fog. A country hymn about green places and mountain ranges filled with God. He paused, soaking it up.

An English wolfhound, a beagle, and two black Labs sprawled collegially on the mansion's broad, open colonnade. They ignored Howard, unwilling to break the drowsy spell cast by the warm September sun. He tapped gently on the door.

The woman who appeared was plain but striking, much like the mansion itself. She wore a simple black dress, no makeup. She was somber but not visibly grief-stricken. She looked at him through the screen.

"Mrs. Grant?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry to intrude. I'm Jim Howard. The Attorney General sent me down here."

"Yes?" she said, making no move to open the door.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to see your daughter."

"Why? I thought that would be taken care of later."

"The technical things, yes. She'll be taken to Springfield. I'm here as part of my own investigative routine. . . . I'm sorry, I know how impersonal it seems."

"I think I understand. Please come in."

She opened the door and led him down a long hallway. Howard noticed her slimness, the graceful, athletic way she walked. Horsewoman, he thought. Her short hair was bright black with hints of silver. They entered a large, breezy room filled with sunlight. A finely polished cherry casket barren of ornamentation rested on a bier at its center. In one corner, a girl of about fourteen was making a violin sing with inexpressible sadness. In another corner, fading into the woodwork, sat a man in a dated brown suit. Howard recognized him from the Springfield lab.

Ida escorted Howard to the casket. In it lay an exquisite young woman in a white dress, a crescent of thick, glossy black hair

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framing her face and shoulders. Death had not stilled the vibrancy of youth. The air above her seemed to pulsate. Howard's hand came up to his eyes, as if to shield them from a brightness. He braced himself on the edge of the casket.

Ida gestured toward the violinist. The music ceased.

"Give me a moment," Howard breathed. She grasped his arm to steady him, making him even more self-conscious. Enter the seasoned pro, he thought. Childless after two failed marriages, he believed that the death of a child was the most devastating tragedy life could serve up. He empathized with parents who hot-bloodedly pursued personal justice for the killers of their children. Ida, who gazed calmly at him, apparently dwelt at the other end of the spectrum.

Tucked into the crook of Evelyn's arm was a yellowed photograph in an oval antique frame. It was of a balding old man with a wildly streaming white beard. He sat cross-legged, wearing a black suit, a white shirt, a black string tie, and high black boots. His cheerful, curious eyes stared across a chasm of time.

"Relative?" he asked.

She followed his eyes. "Yes. William Grant. He settled here before the Civil War. He was a Quaker. Evelyn knew him through his journals, which she read and reread. She admired him greatly."

"And Evelyn and your family, are you Quakers?"

"We do not belong to the Society of Friends, although we agree with their de-emphasis on systems of theology. And like them, we also believe in nonviolence, forgiveness, and nonresistance to evil."

Howard nodded, studying the still figure in the casket.

"Nonresistance to evil," he repeated. "I guess I've never heard it phrased quite like that. Would she have resisted her attacker?"

"Probably not."

"Perhaps she should have." He'd been thinking out loud and instantly regretted it.

She immediately turned, her gray eyes fixing on his face, a thread of anger in her voice. "Understanding our values may be part of your job, but I'm quite certain challenging them is not."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Howard said quickly. "Just answer a few brief questions and I'll be on my way. Do you think your daughter knew her assailant?"

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"It's possible."

"What can you tell me about Curtis Knox and Major Finn? How well do you know them?"

"I've known Curtis since he was a child. He is very talented." She offered nothing more.

Howard was aware that she was speaking slowly, selecting her words with caution. He gently prodded: "That's not much for a lifetime of knowing."

Ida reached down, touching her daughter's cheek. She looked up at Howard, for he was much taller. He saw anguish and strength in her face.

"And Major Finn?" he asked.

"New love hates companions. I was only with them twice. Our world was quite different from that of Major Finn. I think that was part of the attraction."

"He and your daughter seem an unlikely pair."

"He has a certain centurion magnetism and Evelyn was very young."

"Do you think Finn loved her?"

"Unquestionably, to the extent that men like that can love anyone."

"You don't think soldiers can love as deeply as other men?"

Ida Grant regarded him keenly and with obvious irritation. He felt her energy and knew he was about to be engaged.

"Are you a military man, Mr. Howard?"

"I was, for a time."

"Then taking orders should be easy for you. I want this matter settled quickly. Whatever it is you do to close an investigation, do it. Whatever you have to do to Sheriff Porter to get him to cooperate, do it, but get this thing over with."

"Mrs. Grant, the state doesn't pay me to derail investigations or to bring them to a premature close. I'm paid to see that justice is done."

"Life is a mystery, Mr. Howard. Where mystery starts, justice ends. I wake up each morning and try to be merciful. I live my life that way. I don't know how to wake up each morning and be just. Neither does anyone else."

"Someone commits a violent act, I try to stop them from committing another one."

"By legally murdering them or putting them in a cage forever," she said. "I'm convinced what happened to Evelyn involved a

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single moment's loss of control. I'm not going to ruin someone's life for that."

"Your approval isn't necessary."

"The judgment of their own hearts and of God is all the justice that's required. If I'm content with that, the law should be."

Hiding his loathing of her naive, half-baked philosophy, Howard looked down at her daughter, murdered in the full blush of youth.

Not this law, he thought. "Mrs. Grant, I'm sorry to have troubled you."

Speeding down U.S. 65, Howard muttered, "Screw this!" and jerked his car to the side of the road. He checked a rumpled map for a town within easy reach of Reed City. They'd sent him in blind—no lab report, no service jacket—to placate some moneybags who merely wanted him to ignore the entire criminal justice process so she could preserve the freedom of a killer. Well, to hell with them all. He would disappear for a day or two, do some fishing, and wait for some hard facts to surface. Then he would go to work and nail the bastard.

Reed City had resisted the strip-mall syndrome; the business district retained an attractive collection of quaint stores and shops. Nestled comfortably among them was the sheriff's office, its design deliberately low-key to support the touristy effect. Howard went in to find a uniformed young man pecking away at a personal computer.

"I'm looking for Sheriff Porter."

After finishing an entry, the man glanced up. Husky, fair, and freckled, he was solid small-town stock, Howard thought. And grim-faced.

"I'm Rusty Porter. And you'd be Jim Howard. Some guy from the capital has been trying to reach you. A package came for you this morning. It's marked Confidential. Guess they were afraid one of us hillbillies might open it." He returned to his keyboard so abruptly that Howard almost laughed at the clumsiness of the snub. Great, from a pushy lady in an ivory tower to a snot-nosed punk sheriff.

Howard moved directly behind Porter's chair, spun him around, and put both hands on his forearms. Porter tried to

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break loose but Howard leaned in, pinning him with the weight of his large frame. They were eye-to-eye.

"Ever handled a murder case?"

"What the hell . . ."

"Humor me for a few seconds. *Have you ever handled a murder case?*"

"No," Porter spit.

"Did you know Evelyn Grant?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"All my life."

"Did you like her?"

"Everyone did. She was a wonderful girl."

"I'm not asking everyone, I'm asking you. Did *you* like her?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel about her dying, this wonderful lifetime friend of yours?"

Porter's eyes misted over. He stopped straining against Howard's bulk.

"One time I had a crush on her so bad I couldn't sleep for months," he whispered. He was angry, but wanted to trust. Howard released his arms. "I guess I need help," Porter said grudgingly.

"Any cop would need help in your situation. You're too close. I've seen nearly a hundred murdered women. Never knew any of them. Don't know if I could handle it."

Porter went over to the coffee sink, splashed cold water on his face, and dried off with a wad of paper towels. "You're pretty free with your hands. Don't do it again."

"Great icebreaker, though, wasn't it?" Howard grinned. "Look, you've got the local knowledge and authority, I've got the experience, let's see if we can't hang someone's ass real quick-like. Come on, I'll buy you lunch. Then we can go through that package together."

"Another time," Porter said.

Howard shrugged. A professional distance suited him fine. Small-town cops were good at solving homicides where the husband stands sobbing, smoking gun in hand, over his dead wife's body. Or vice versa. They rarely see any other kind. Howard's goal with Porter was pure damage control: Don't let his inexperience and petty biases wreck the case.

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Howard settled at an empty desk and ripped open the package. He skimmed it; mostly hard copy of what Mastrofski had already told him. "Okay," he said, "how about filling me in on the details. Then we'll figure out how to proceed. I'm just here to help."

"You work for me."

"Absolutely. Let's talk about Knox and Finn. Either of them ever rough up the Grant woman?"

"No. Not even any gossip. I'd have heard."

"What about when she ditched Knox for the major?"

"Curtis didn't like that. He's got an ego on him. Said he was going to bust up the major. We all got a kick out of that."

"Why?"

"You'll know when you meet Finn. He's a born killer. I'll bet his war record proves it."

"It does. But we call people like him heroes, not killers. Bring it up in a court of law and the jury will applaud. It was all in the combat zone, every bit."

"Okay, but he's trained to kill and he has killed. Makes it all that much easier." Porter's dislike for Finn was palpable.

"Not necessarily. I know a Green Beret who used to clean Viet Cong out of tunnels with a flashlight and .45. Now he can't even swat a fly or poison a mouse. Knox a friend of yours?"

Porter smiled bleakly. "Used to be in his band. Bass guitar. Look, I know why you're here. I know I got out of line with Finn. I know I'm in over my head. But that gung-ho bastard killed her. I'm sure of it."

"Definitely possible. Tell me about him and Grant."

"She chased him so hard we were embarrassed for her."

"If she wanted him, she'd have to chase him," Howard said.

"Why? She was a knockout."

"Because he didn't know how to chase her. Lifetime bachelor, lived on military bases for twenty years. Had no experience with classy ladies. What was their relationship like?"

"Went everywhere together. He couldn't sleep over at the mansion because of Ida, I guess, so Ev got an apartment."

"And what is Knox thinking about all this?"

"His pride was hurt. Deep down I think he figured Evelyn was just infatuated and would come back to him."

"What did you think?"

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"No chance. Evelyn and the major gave off heat waves like blacktop on an August afternoon. I mean, sure, they were sleeping together, but it was more than that. When he looked at her . . ." Porter's voice trailed off.

"Like a proud father watching his daughter perform in a school play?"

Porter's eyes widened. "Yes. Exactly like that."

"Mix lust with the adoration you feel for a child and you've got one hell of a strong brew," Howard said. "To have Grant flip for him at this point in his life must have been the answer to his wildest fantasies."

"Fantasies? That guy?"

Howard laughed. "Good Marines show you nothing. That's how they're trained. Until they go into action. Then you find yourself laid out on the floor with a screaming, fire-breathing dragon standing over you. Tell me about the Grants. Does the town know about their pacifism?"

"Yeah. Common knowledge."

"Any idea how deep it runs?"

"Deep. They're pretty reckless about it. Word's gotten around over the years, so their place has been broken into and their cars have been stolen, but they never press charges."

Howard shook his head. "Only in a small town. She wouldn't last ten minutes in St. Louis."

"Maybe not, but she's got guts. She's a registered nurse. Evelyn was too. Helped out in the clinic here in town and did relief work in Somalia, places like that. Ida came back from India so sick she almost died. Didn't stop her, though."

"What have we got from the neighbors and other possible witnesses?"

"Haven't had a chance to do much. I've been tied up with transferring the body and searching the scene."

"Phone records?"

"Not yet."

Howard hid his irritation. "Well, we've got work to do," he said. The phone rang and Howard grabbed it. A shadow passed over Porter's face, but he smiled when Howard said, "Sheriff Porter's office, assistant Jim Howard speaking."

"Howard, where have you been?" Mastrofski asked impatiently.

"Field work. What have you got?"

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"Your life's about to get very complicated."

"Skip the riddles."

"We've got semen all right. From two different men. Lab says they can't establish a sequence, just that they were proximate, within hours. . . . Howard, you there?"

"Go on."

"Nothing under the nails, no bruises except from the fall."

"That doesn't mean much. She probably didn't move a muscle to defend herself. How about the neck?"

"Break is so clean they say it could have been done only two ways: forearm lock or, if the guy was really strong, just grabbed her skull between both hands and twisted. One slight bruise suggests the latter."

"Professional?"

"Can't say. Kids on playgrounds use the forearm lock. The semen revealed blood types A and AB, and there's plenty of donor-specific antibodies that will move us from probabilities to certainties with any suspects. The specimens are quite dissimilar. One man has a sperm count off the chart and the other was almost shooting blanks."

"Meaning?"

"One young lover and one old."

"What kind of spin do you guys put on all this?"

"Miss Grant had a busy night."

Looking thoughtfully at Porter, Howard slowly placed the phone in its cradle. "They found semen from two men," he said.

Porter released a thin whistle.

"Can't determine the order, but the specimens are good enough to make blood-type matches with at least ninety percent accuracy. Nevertheless, the legal permutations are endless. Ida Grant may just get her wish."

"What do you mean?"

"Without material witnesses and other strong evidence, double semen creates so much opportunity for confusion and reasonable doubt that a legal-aid lawyer could build an airtight defense. Damn it, if they'd examined the body right away we'd probably know the sequence."

"What if Finn . . ." Porter began, but Howard raised his hand, cutting him off.

"No point in speculating. There may be other facts out there just as important as the semen. We won't know until we do the

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spade work. How about this: Have your people take care of the phone company and the neighbors. You question Knox personally. Indicate that semen was found and ask him to take a blood test. Don't indicate in any way that two men are involved. Just say 'semen.' "

"You going to see Finn?"

"Yeah. How do I get there?"

"He's a good hour out in the boonies. I'll draw you a map. Watch him, Howard. Last time I saw him he was damn near nuts. And he's stopped answering his phone."

"I'll check in with you from his place," Howard said.

It was midafternoon when Howard reached Finn's small, isolated ranch. The surrounding hardwood hills lay strangely still, deadened by the heat of the high sun. A new Jeep wagon was parked in the drive. Howard went to the door and knocked. No answer. He hammered. Nothing. He stepped in. The place was dim, tidy, and colorless. It looked unlived-in, like a model home. Daylight in narrow shafts angled through gaps in the drawn curtains.

He waited a moment to let his eyes adapt to the shadowy interior, then called out. As he moved into the living room, he saw a hulking figure, face buried in hands, sitting perfectly still at the dining-room table. In the middle of the table was the blunt outline of a semiautomatic Colt Army .45.

Howard unconsciously squeezed his upper left arm over the reassuring lump of his shoulder harness. "Major Finn?"

"What do you want?" The cold, disinterested voice was muffled by fingers.

"My name is Jim Howard. I'm with the attorney general's office. I'm assisting Sheriff Porter in the investigation of Miss Grant's death."

The figure slowly sat back, parting his hands to look at the intruder. He was more than Howard expected. He put him at about six-four, 275. His darkly tanned, aquiline face was punched and marred and his silvery-brown hair was cropped boot-camp short. Even silent and motionless, he exuded sheer animal power.

"Are you alone?" Finn asked.

"Does it matter?" Howard responded, screamingly aware that he was very much alone. The eerie light, the silence, the gun,

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the odd question . . . dancing in Howard's brain was the word "madness." He took three steps back, eyes riveted on Finn's hands and the gun before him.

Finn stood up to his full height, a feral smile playing over his lips, clearly understanding Howard's backward steps. Howard, who was six foot, felt like a child. Sweating, he took a few more steps back, hand resting inside his jacket on the butt of his revolver.

"Mr. Finn, move away from the table to your left." Finn, immobile, stared defiantly. "Move," Howard hissed. Now his .38 was out and leveled. As Finn slid away, Howard quickly came forward and picked up the gun.

"You're in my house, mister. Uninvited. Taking my weapon, which I've owned legally for twenty years. You can't do that."

"I'm not taking it. I'm moving it." Without turning his back, Howard crossed the room and put the handgun on the top shelf of a bookcase. He holstered his revolver, maintaining a healthy distance from the big man.

"I know Sheriff Porter has already talked to you . . ."

"He didn't talk to me," Finn interrupted. "He accused me. He's a green, excitable hick who's got his first look at death and can't handle it."

"But you can handle it, can't you? You've seen lots of it."

"Truckloads."

"Yeah, well, I'm not here to accuse you. I'm simply gathering facts. Of course, you don't have to talk to me now. We can do it in town with your lawyer present."

"Go ahead. You made a long drive."

"Describe your activities with Miss Grant on the day of her death."

"I picked her up about noon. We drove over to Waringville. She wanted to visit some friends. We drove back to Reed City about six and had dinner at the Carpenter Inn. Then we went over to hear Knox's band. Stayed there until eleven o'clock or so, then I took her home."

"Did you go into her apartment?"

"No. I just walked her to the door."

"Was that usual?"

"I've been staying over pretty regularly. But Ida was picking her up early, so I went home."

"Did you return later that night or did she call you or you her?"

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"No and no."

"Did she behave strangely or seem worried about anything?"

"No."

"Think hard, Mr. Finn. Are you leaving out anything relevant?"

"Nothing."

"I want you to check in with Sheriff Porter within twenty-four hours so that he can arrange a blood test. We're looking for matches with semen taken from Miss Grant's body."

"Good for you," Finn said. He remained ramrod straight, face thrust arrogantly down at Howard. A man born and trained for confrontation, Howard thought. Comfortable with it. He abruptly turned his back on Finn, walked casually to an easy chair, and sank down.

"I saw Evelyn at her wake," Howard said softly. "She was so young and beautiful, her whole life ahead of her. I almost lost it. Have you ever noticed how the angels never seem to be around when good people are getting killed?"

Finn relaxed his martinet stance, openly peering across the room, trying to read Howard's face. He wet his lips. With hands like scarred catcher's mitts, he dug into his pockets, producing a pack of Camels and a brass lighter. Saying nothing, he lit up.

"First I see delicate, sensitive Evelyn Grant. And now I see you, a fifty-year-old hard case who's seen truckloads of death. It must have been a sublime revelation learning to be intimate with her. I'll bet you've never revealed yourself to anyone before."

Finn's face went blank: a screen switched off.

"What happened between Evelyn and me is none of your business," he said tonelessly.

"In a rape-murder? You're dreaming. You're going to be grilled in open court. Your relationship will be on parade. And if the tests tell us you're lying, adios, brother."

"It was a miracle she ever wanted me," Finn said thickly, voice nearly breaking. "I could never hurt her."

"Not on purpose, maybe," Howard said. "But you're awfully strong and she was a fragile creature." Howard sensed that Finn was drifting off to that empty, dark place he'd inhabited before he'd arrived. He tried to pull him back.

"Rumor has it Evelyn had a return of the hots for Curtis Knox, that she was going back to him."

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Finn's war face blossomed with such sudden menace that Howard slid his hand back into his jacket. Lips pressed back against hard white teeth; narrow slits where eyes had been: a tight, savage mask that had been the last thing seen on this green earth by a score of enemies. But Finn could not sustain his fury. Like hot wax, his face dissolved into an unreadable blur of emotions. He looked stupidly at Howard, as if trying to remember who he was.

"Knox," Howard said quickly. "I was talking about Knox."

Finn waved his hand dismissively. "He was just part of her coming of age. Sort of a growing pain. She showed me a passage in her diary that said as much."

"She kept a diary?"

"Faithfully," Finn said absently. "It's a family tradition. Both she and Ida confide more in their diaries than they do in people." He glanced forlornly around the cave-dark room and sagged into his seat at the table. "Evelyn lit this place up like a flare."

Howard got up and walked over to Finn. "Major, is there anything else you want to tell me? Do you want to reconsider anything you've said?" Finn's dull, listless eyes came full into Howard's. He was a shell.

Howard went to the phone and took out a small notebook. He punched in a number.

"Hi, Rusty, Jim Howard. I'm at Finn's. Got anything?"

"A lot," the young sheriff said excitedly. "Got a witness who saw Finn drop Evelyn off about eleven P.M. Didn't go in. Same witness says she saw Knox go into Evelyn's later that night and also saw him leave. This is the type of neighbor lady who would take a special interest in the comings and goings at Evelyn's."

"I know the type," Howard said. "World's full of 'em."

"Curtis denies going to Evelyn's, but the witness is emphatic and wouldn't lie. After I told Knox about the semen and asked for a blood test, he said that he and Evelyn had got together in a backroom of the club while she and Finn were there. Said she wanted to come back to him. Says he never went to her apartment."

"What do you think?"

"Can't buy his story. Just can't buy it. Witness is too strong. And every mother's son around here knows he and Evelyn were ancient history. Besides, Evelyn was definitely not the backroom type."

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"How about phone calls?"

"This is where it gets hairy. Evelyn called Finn early that morning. Timing is such that it would have to have been after Knox had left. So she was still alive after the witness says both guys had left."

"Yes, but the witness didn't stay up all night. Know anything about a diary Evelyn had at her apartment?"

"No. I searched the place good. I'd have spotted something like that. Could have been Ida. She was first on the scene."

"Good work. I'm going over to the Grants' from here."

"Should I bring Knox in?"

"No. We'll talk later." Howard hung up and turned to Finn. "We've got hard evidence that Evelyn called you late that night. I need to ask you again about reconsidering your statement."

"I just walked her to the door." The glowing tip of his cigarette was burning into his fingers."

"That's what I thought," Howard said.

Howard pulled into the Grant courtyard, this time empty of cars. He got his handcuffs out of the glove compartment and put them in his back pocket. He walked around the mansion, hoping it was as deserted as it looked. When he completed his circle, Mrs. Grant was waiting.

"What are you doing?"

"If you had guests, I didn't want to disturb you."

"No one's here. What do you want?"

"Your daughter's diary. It's not at her apartment. You were first on the scene. It may contain useful or even incriminating information. Do you have the diary, Mrs. Grant? Withholding it is a crime."

She was silent.

"If you did have the diary, would you give it to me?"

"No. I told you I want all this to end right now."

"I remember. And while you were telling me, I was looking at your daughter, thinking about the children she would never have." Howard made a sweeping gesture. "This big old place could use the sound of laughing children."

Ida Grant's face was stony.

"Your daughter's never going to have children, Ida," Howard said quietly. "You're never going to have grandchildren. You'll never see their faces or hear their voices or watch them rough-

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house with your wolfhound and his pals. Did Evelyn have a favorite season?"

Her look had softened. The two were enveloped by the great silence of the huge place. It brought them closer somehow.

"Autumn," she said.

"Yes. The colors. The crisp, clean air. The sense of things departing. Autumn is almost upon us, but Evelyn won't see it. Ida, give me the diary so I can find the man who took away all her autumns."

She hesitated, then rekindled her determination. "I'm sorry. I don't want anyone else hurt. Evelyn has already made her peace with whoever was . . . involved."

"Involved!?" Howard shouted. "You talk like she was forced to attend a bad poetry reading. She was raped and murdered. Right now she's lying on an autopsy table sliced up like a side of beef. Now give me that goddamn book so I can fry the son of a bitch who did this. Turn it over or so help me I'll cuff you to my car and turn this place upside down!" He jerked the handcuffs out and shook them at her. "I'm not going to let you get rid of it while I'm trying to get a warrant, which I probably couldn't get anyway because of your pull around here."

She looked at the handcuffs, then at Howard, and to his astonishment began to laugh, a sound as clear and natural as the whistle of a cardinal.

"That would be a spectacle, indeed," she finally managed. "Besides, it would be illegal."

"You have your way of ignoring the law and I have mine. Anyway, how could you press charges? It would go against your beliefs."

Her smile vanished as suddenly as it appeared. She gave him a long, appraising look. "You are a very earnest man, Mr. Howard."

"Your choice," he said, extending the cuffs.

"Your career would be over the moment you touched me."

"I'll take that chance. There's no one here. I'll say you gave me the diary then invented this story because you changed your mind. It'll be your word against mine. We'll see how it plays. Either way, I get the diary. Wouldn't surprise me if it's right out in plain sight, maybe in your bedroom. You wouldn't have thought anyone would come looking."

"You're gambling that I won't hurt you to protect this person."

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"This killer."

She studied him, wrestling with her thoughts. "I will get you the diary," she said reluctantly.

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind," he said, stuffing the cuffs back into his pocket.

As they mounted the stairs, she said, "It has what you want. Identification, motive, other things."

"What does it say?"

"Curtis wanted her back. He'd been bothering her for some time. He came over that night to entreat her. When she turned him away, he became angry and took her against her will. She didn't struggle, but she said she was going to turn him in. He threatened her, then left. I guess he became afraid of what she'd do and came back. She wrote it all out as a way of helping herself handle it on her own, to avoid calling Major Finn. She wanted badly to tell him, but she was afraid of what he'd do. She couldn't reach me because I was traveling."

They entered a bedroom.

"This was Evelyn's room," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. She pointed to the nightstand, which had a telephone on it. "It's in the top drawer."

Howard walked to the window and looked out over the courtyard.

"Did you know your daughter finally did call the major late that night?"

"No."

"Do you think she'd have told him what happened?"

"No. But he surely would have sensed that something awful had occurred."

"And rushed over?"

She paused. "Yes. He loved my daughter very much."

"I believe that," Howard said, picking up the phone. "Rusty, Jim. Go get your guitar-picking friend and book him for murder one. . . . Yeah, I got it. I'll explain later." He hung up. Ida was watching him.

"There's more, isn't there." It wasn't a question.

He shrugged. "Nothing that requires action."

"I want to know."

"I'm not sure you do."

"Curtis Knox is going on trial for his life. I have a right to know."

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"All right. I saw Finn. He's one hell of a mess. He's in a totally irrational state of denial, denying things he knows we can prove, like talking to Evelyn on the phone. The clincher is, if Finn believed Knox killed your daughter, Knox would be dead. Consequences be damned. The only reason Finn wouldn't rip Knox apart is if he himself feels more responsible."

"Something happened when he went to her," she said.

"Yes. She probably told him what happened, and he snapped. May-December jealousy, insecurity, impossible to know. Something black and powerful got hold of him, something he couldn't control. This is a man who cuts off ears and pushes people out of helicopters when he gets fired up."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Knox raped your daughter and that Finn subsequently raped and killed her."

Ida Grant's face twisted up. She slumped onto the bed and buried her face in a pillow, weeping and murmuring her daughter's name. Howard sat beside her, resting his hand on her shoulder. She reached up and covered it with her own. They remained that way for some minutes, then Howard leaned down close to her.

"I will tell you this because it may help. Justice is being done here. Knox will be harshly punished by law. If he doesn't assault your daughter, none of this happens. He probably believed she'd never utter a word because of her beliefs and their former relationship. That's an unspeakably cowardly form of premeditation.

"Finn will be his own judge and jury. Bone-deep, he's a good man. More than once he's rescued men under fire and got hit doing it. Somehow he's found a way to repress this thing, but it's destroying him. It won't last. Soon his true character will emerge and he'll accept responsibility."

Wet-eyed, she looked up from the pillow. "And turn himself in?"

"No," Howard said with grim satisfaction. "That's the beauty of it. He'll shower, take a really close shave, put on his dress blues, medals, and campaign ribbons, and blow his brains out. He had his .45 out on the table when I questioned him. I doubt if he'll see the sunset."

"That appeals to you."

Howard nodded, handing her his handkerchief. "It's what he deserves. If I pick him up now and both men go on trial, their

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lawyers will have a field day raising confusion and doubt with the jury. Hell, they might walk. But this way, with the diary, the jury will reach the same conclusion you did about Knox returning. Plus they'll feel sorry for Evelyn *and* the dear departed major. They'll string Knox up to the nearest tree."

Ida sat up, their hands separating.

"I'm going to the major," she said simply. "He's all alone. He needs help."

Howard was thunderstruck. "You must be crazy," he whispered vehemently. "Just stay the hell out of it. It's going our way. Can't you see that?"

"It's not going *our* way," she said firmly. "It's going *your* way. What you see unfolding suits your sense of justice. Well, it doesn't suit mine. Or Evelyn's." She took one of his hands in both of her own. "Try to understand. Evelyn would beg me, *beg me* to help him."

Howard jerked his hand away. "You can't go. It's a police matter. He's armed, for Christ's sake, liable to do anything!"

"In such instances, the Quakers have a saying: 'All he has is thee.' Well, at this moment, you and I are all Major Finn has. There's no one else." With a strong grip, she took his hand once again. "Come with me. I can tell you respect, even admire him, except for those few disastrous moments with my Evelyn. Don't let him end his life this way."

She sat with his hand in hers, absorbing his enraged glare. He didn't move or speak. She rose and left the room.

Howard heard her car leave. He got up stiffly and returned to the window. As he looked out over the sun-dappled courtyard, he glimpsed a slight, graceful figure in a flowing white gown. Evelyn Grant looked up at the window, her face radiant in the sunshine.

"All she has is thee," she called to him.

Howard shook himself, then tore down the stairs to his car. ●

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THE LADY AT THE CROSSROADS

by Margery Allingham

"Mr. Lemuel Capet, late of Wellside, Lancs., guarantees to place a donation to the Wellside Fund of twelve thousand pounds in the hands of anyone proving himself to be The Red Rose, in exchange for half an hour's conversation. This offer is straightforward and contains no hidden trap.—Advert."

"Did you ever read anything so perfectly idiotic as that announcement?"

Tommy Kempis handed the paper to the beautiful, blue-eyed girl who sat opposite him in the theatre box. The first interval had just begun, and Betty, radiant in a swathed, maize-coloured gown of *mousseline de soie,* her luxurious evening cloak hanging

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over the back of the little gilt chair, its rich sable collar enhancing the dazzling whiteness of her skin, smiled at him and leaned forward, and as she did so many people in the stalls and circle, who had recognised her as Lady Derry's beautiful protégé, remarked upon her loveliness to their companions.

She read the advertisement he indicated, and her fine eyebrows rose.

"How very extraordinary," she said, a carefully assumed note of casualness hiding the interest she really felt. "Surely that won't do any good, will it?"

Tommy Kempis sighed and shook his head. He picked up his silver cigarette case from the box rail in front of him and toyed with its contents.

"Of course it won't," he said testily. "That's the infuriating part of it. He's simply calling the famous crook's attention towards him. Who's going to answer an advertisement like that? Only a lot of fakes eager to get hold of the money."

Betty frowned. "Who is this Lemuel Capet?" she said, flicking up her long feather to hide her face.

The young man answered her readily. "My dear girl, you must have heard of him. He's one of the wealthiest men in the city. Of course, he was one of the eight financiers who were in that disgraceful Wellside affair which our precious crook seems so interested in. Do you know, Betty, I rather fancy that those eight men have had a consultation."

The girl did not look at him; indeed, she turned deliberately and bowed to an acquaintance she had seen sitting in the stalls,

In April we featured a Margery Allingham story never before seen in this country, though it was published sixty-five years ago in England. The story was the first of eight adventures about a spirited girl from a Lancashire village who never forgets her roots. The Red Rose, as she styles herself, is on a quest for revenge on the financiers who brought ruin to her home in Lancashire. We will publish one more of the stories later this year; for the rest, see *The Darings of the Red Rose* (Crippen & Landru Publishers).

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but it was not disinterestedness that made her turn her head. Tommy went on talking.

"Of course, I think they deserve all they get," he said. "It's awfully difficult to put my heart into an attempt to save these bounders a few thousand pounds. But I know they're getting scared, and, anyway, I suppose I must get on with my job and do all I can to help them, which is not easy when they do things like this," he went on bitterly, tapping the paper.

The face that Betty turned towards him was the complete picture of innocence.

"Then you're certain The Red Rose won't answer that advertisement?" she inquired.

Tommy laughed. "The Red Rose will be a fool if he does," he said.

The girl's blue eyes widened. "Then it's a trap?" she said.

Tommy nodded. "Of course it is. I think I can guess exactly what happened. These eight men had a meeting. Two of them had already been openly victimised, and a third presented a very large sum of money to a Wellside charity in rather a mysterious fashion. Well, I think they were all terrified, and I expect our friend Lemuel Capet put forward his little advertising scheme and they jumped at it as a last hope. It's the silliest thing I've ever heard of, but, of course, what can you expect from a man like Lemuel Capet?"

Betty laughed at the disgust in his face: "Not a nice person?" she said inquiringly.

Tommy grimaced. "Not at all nice," he said with feeling. "A mean, overfed, small-minded person. I may be prejudiced, but he strikes me as not having a single redeeming feature. He has a great estate in the country, where they say his tenants are terrified of him. And not only that," he went on comically, "but he has a great red roll of fat over the back of his collar, and I always hate a man like that."

Betty opened her mouth to speak, but changed her mind and was silent, and at that moment the curtain rose upon the second act of the absorbing play they were witnessing.

But the girl was no longer interested in the story portrayed upon the stage; she sat back in the shadow so that no light from the stage could fall upon her face. As she sat there in the darkness a new expression had crept over that beautiful face. She was no longer laughing, neither had she the strange sad, half-

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wistful look at which the Hon. Tommy Kempis had so often wondered, but instead there had come into her eyes a new determination, a new daring, which no one had ever seen there before.

The Voice on the Telephone

"Oh, Miss Betty, be careful." Marie spoke earnestly, her strong dark face alight with consternation. "It's not safe."

Betty shook her head. Swathed in a gorgeous tea gown whose lacquer-red and silver folds clung to her slender figure, she stood by her dressing table, her precious little notebook in her hand. There was a new excitement in her eyes and her lips quivered.

"Nonsense, Marie," she said softly. "Don't you see that advertisement gives me an opportunity which I might never get again. Lemuel Capet is a man whose whole life has been devoted to money. Twelve thousand pounds remains a great sum to him in spite of his great wealth. To force him to part with twelve thousand pounds, for the Wellside Fund, of course, will hurt him more deeply than anything else anyone could ever do.

"I have set out to punish these men. I have sworn to do it—to make them pay for the miseries they caused and the sins they committed, and I fancy that this advertisement delivers yet another one of them into our hands. Don't be scared, Marie," she went on, noticing that her staunch friend and associate was now genuinely frightened. "I think I can see our way."

Marie sighed, and a resigned expression crept into her dark eyes.

"All right, Miss Betty," she said. "But there's one thing I beg of you—let me help you. If there's any danger let me share it."

Betty shot a smile at her.

"Thank you, Marie," she said. "I shall need you." Then she moved over to the telephone and deliberately gave the number she had just discovered in the phone book. Within five minutes she was speaking to Lemuel Capet himself.

The voice on the phone was an unpleasant one. It was breathless and inclined to be guttural. Betty's opinion of the man sank even lower than it had been before.

"Hello," she said. "Is that Mr. Capet?"

"Yes," the voice said wonderingly. "My secretary tells me that the Lady Wessex is speaking."

Betty laughed, a soft, unmusical chuckle, quite different from her own. "I'm afraid you were misinformed, Mr. Capet," she said.

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"I am ringing up from a call box in Piccadilly. This is The Red Rose speaking."

There was an audible gasp from the other end of the wire.

"I chose a call box," Betty lied calmly, still speaking in the strained, soft voice with a threatening note lingering in its depths, "because it occurred to me that you might attempt to trace the call. I don't altogether trust you, Mr. Capet, but I took the liberty of giving Lady Wessex's name so that I might be sure of speaking to you yourself."

"How do I know that you are the Red Rose?" the voice came cautiously from the wire.

"Would you like me to prove it to you?" Betty's voice had sunk until it was almost a whisper, and there was something curiously menacing in her gentle, purring tone.

There was silence from the other end of the wire for some considerable time. The Red Rose's exploits were so famous and so dreaded that Lemuel Capet had good cause to be afraid.

"I read your advertisement," Betty went on, "and I thank you. I shall be glad to contribute the twelve thousand pounds you mention in it to those funds which are in most urgent need of them."

Lemuel Capet's voice took on a note of heavy cunning.

"You must come and fetch the money," he said. "I want to see you—that's part of the bargain. When will you come?"

"Aren't you looking forward to interviewing me?" Betty allowed her amusement to sound in her voice. "You will have about forty policemen all round you, I suppose. You must think me a very stupid person, Mr. Capet."

The contempt in her voice stung the man. "Nonsense," he said, "I should be alone."

"That's very brave of you," Betty replied lightly. "Am I to understand then that you are offering me this vast sum simply because you want to meet me?"

The millionaire answered her slowly. "No," he said, "but I will confess to you that I am afraid. Every man with whom I was associated in a certain incident concerning Wellside has either received or fears to receive a visit from you. I am anxious to buy myself out, if you understand me. If you will come for the money, you shall have it. I shall not appeal to the police. Do you agree?"

In spite of himself he could not keep the eagerness out of his voice. He fancied that he was bluffing very well.

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At her end of the wire Betty smiled to herself. "Splendid," she said.

"Then you'll come?" Lemuel Capet's voice rose jubilantly.

"No," said Betty softly, "we will meet out. I don't fancy your hospitality. Forgive me, but I can't help that. I will send you a note containing full instructions. I should file them if I were you. You will know that the letter is a genuine one by a red rosebud which will be enclosed. Goodbye."

She rang off.

Marie stood quivering beside her mistress. "Oh, Miss Betty, how you dared," she said. "If they should trace the telephone number. . . ."

"Well?" Betty shot her a quizzical glance. "Telephone girls sometimes make mistakes, and who would believe their word against mine?"

Marie nodded, but she was still dubious. "I know," she said, "but, oh! it is dangerous. And, besides, what are you going to do now?"

"Wait," said Betty. "I sent a note to Mr. Capet this morning. I should think he would receive it in about an hour's time. It will have an East End postmark. And when we see what effect that has upon him and his friends at Scotland Yard we will decide upon our next movement."

"But what have you arranged?" said Marie miserably. "If we should fail?"

Betty cut her short. "Keep your spirit up, Marie," she said, "and we won't fail. Do you know, Marie, I have an idea that this is going to be the prettiest, neatest affair of all this curious career of ours. And remember," she went on with sudden gravity, "remember what they did to our home."

The Trap

Marie did not have long to wait, as Betty had predicted.

The following morning Tommy Kempis called upon Betty. She found him waiting for her when she came in from her morning ride in the park, looking wonderfully fresh and neat in her smart riding habit of black cloth. The young man looked at her admiringly. He was jubilant, and his good humour and excitement were apparent immediately.

"I say, you look wonderful," he said. "Must you dash up to change right away? Can't you stay and listen to my marvellous

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news? We've got it all taped. This time tomorrow night The Red Rose will be under lock and key."

Betty shot him a single swift glance, and then, seeing that he spoke seriously, she repressed the slow, bitter smile that had risen to her lips. She wondered what his attitude would have been had he guessed the identity of the girl who stood before him.

"You're not interested?" he said, noticing her expressionless face. "How wrong of me to come up here worrying you about things that don't concern you in the least," he went on regretfully.

Betty beamed at him. "Nonsense," she said. "It has a lot to do with me. I read the papers every day most carefully. I'm quite as excited over the whole affair as you or anybody else. Do tell me about it."

She sat down beside him on the deep leather couch in the old oak-furnished morning room.

"How's it going to be managed?" she demanded. "Have you found out who the mysterious person is?"

"Well, not exactly," said Tommy cheerfully, "but we know it's a woman because she had the audacity to talk to old Capet on the phone last night. He came round crazy with excitement this morning. He's had a letter from The Red Rose putting up a most extraordinary scheme to him.

"He is to meet her in broad daylight at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning at Webley Moor, on the Great North Road. There's a famous crossroads there, you know, right in the middle of the moor. Of course, it's quite obvious why she chose the place, because although there's always plenty of traffic on the road, there's no cover for an ambush for at least a mile in any of the four different ways. So she's not a fool—simply an over-daring woman. By Jove, Betty," he went on, his eyes lighting up, "sometimes I can't help admiring her."

Betty dared not look at him lest her eyes should betray her pleasure. Somehow, just lately, it had been very difficult for her to carry on with the work she had pledged herself to do, knowing all the time that she was working against Tommy—that Tommy was in reality her enemy. If she could believe that he could ever understand, it would make everything so much easier.

"Apparently," said Tommy slowly, "old Capet has made her believe that he's acting on the level for once. That's why this

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scheme of his is rather dirty. Still, I suppose the woman's got to be captured, so there it is."

"What scheme?" said Betty, trying hard to keep any of the anxiety which she felt well out of her voice.

The young man grinned and spread out his elegant shoes to the fire. "Well, it's a bit complicated," he said, "but it works out quite simply. You see, The Red Rose's letter to Capet was like this."

He took a sheet of copying paper out of his pocket and spread it out for her to see.

"Webley Moor crossroads at eleven o'clock Friday morning," it ran. "Drive up in your car at eleven o'clock sharp. I will meet you there. Hand the money in notes, in a parcel, out of the window. I shall wear a red rose, that is how you will know me."

Betty laughed as she finished reading. "How exciting," she said, "and is Mr. Capet really going to do all this?"

"He's going to obey it to the letter," Tommy assured her gravely, "but he's thought out a really neat way of outwitting her. We shall have four police traps on the four roads, each one about a mile from the crossroads, and we shall have a lookout man with a field telephone and glasses on the top of Webley Ben—that's a fairly big hillock also about a mile from the crossroads.

"Old Capet's red Daimler will be perfectly easy to recognise with glasses at that distance. He will arrive at eleven o'clock and will hand the money to the mysterious lady. Then he will go back to be well out of danger. Then the lookout man will follow the lady's car with his glasses, see which road she takes, get the description of her car, and simply telephone it to whichever police trap she is bound to pass. There, you see, that's the scheme—rather elaborate, but it can't fail, can it?"

"I shouldn't think so," agreed Betty slowly.

"That's what's pleasing old Capet so," said Tommy. "I'm afraid I shall be on the job myself; I may be the lookout man. I don't like the idea. It seems rather mean after the fellow has made her believe that he is going to pay up."

Betty did not answer; the old thoughtful expression had returned to her eyes. Tommy changed the subject.

"When shall I see you again?"

"I don't know," she said lightly. "I'm going up north myself tomorrow morning early to stay for a day or two with Lady Derry."

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He glanced at her hopefully.

"That's at Derry Hall, isn't it?" he said. "Perhaps after this thing is all over I could come along?"

Betty smiled at him. "I'm sure you could," she said gracefully.

But the moment he had left the house she sent for Marie, and the other girl saw, as soon as she entered the room, that something unusual was afoot. Betty's eyes were dancing, and there was an expression of reckless daring in their blue depths.

She outlined the details of Mr. Capet's plan as she heard it from Tommy, and laughed at Marie's involuntary exclamation of apprehension.

"Don't worry, Marie," she said. "I've got a wonderful scheme. I think we can trick Mr. Capet with his own idea. Listen. You know he has a famous red Daimler? Well, it won't be difficult for us to hire another one exactly like it, or, anyway, near enough to confuse anyone who was watching with field glasses from a distance of a mile or so. And this is where you come in. We shall need three cars tomorrow, Marie. Do you see my plan?"

The other girl hesitated. "I think I can guess," she said. "You're going to make them think it's all over before it's really begun, so that they stop the wrong car."

Betty laughed. "Splendid, Marie," she said. "You're coming on."

At the Crossroads

At five minutes to eleven on the following day, a magnificent red Daimler pulled up at the crossroads on Webley Moor. Its colour gleamed in the sun, and it looked curiously self-conscious, as if it knew that far away on the hillock, to the right, Tommy Kempis was watching it, his glasses trained upon its shining bodywork.

Seated at the wheel was a man dressed as a chauffeur, but his face beneath the peaked cap was the face of Marie's friend and assistant, who had done so much for The Red Rose in one of her earlier exploits.

Betty's attempt to get a car resembling that of the millionaire had been completely successful, and Tommy Kempis, watching through his glasses, was utterly deceived.

Almost immediately afterwards, from down the road on the west, came a second car, a black saloon of a very distinctive

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design. It came to a full stop at the corner, and a woman, heavily veiled and dressed in black, stepped out onto the road.

Tommy Kempis, watching her through his field glasses, felt his heart rise in his mouth as he saw her. He could not recognise Marie at that distance, nor did he see the smile upon her face as she ran across to the red Daimler and took something from the driver's hand. After a hasty word with her accomplice chauffeur she returned to the black car and, stepping in, was driving off at speed up the North Road towards the waiting police trap.

Tommy hurled himself upon the field telephone at his side. In a moment he heard the cheery voice of the sergeant in charge of that particular trap.

"Black saloon," he said breathlessly, "old-fashioned type, coming your way. Girl dressed in black from head to foot. Get her; hold her till I come."

He heard the sergeant's cheery "Righto, sir," and then, anxious to be present at the denouement, he scrambled down the hill as fast as he could go, making for his motorcycle, which was waiting for him at the roadside. So engrossed was he that he did not notice a little grey two-seater which had been speeding down the London road and had now come to a stop at the crossroads. Almost immediately afterwards the thing that Betty had hoped for happened.

Sailing down the road towards the two-seater came a second red Daimler, almost identical to the car that had given Tommy such a thrill not five minutes before, and inside it, nervous and excited, sat Lemuel Capet himself. He was not a pleasant sight to look upon as he folded and unfolded his podgy hands across his capacious waistcoat. The brown paper bundle of notes was at his side, genuine notes all of them, since unless the police could prove that The Red Rose had taken actual money from the millionaire their case against her might be difficult to prove.

Capet was frightened. He realised, perhaps better than any of the other financiers, exactly what their coup of long ago had meant to the Wellsiders, and he could not get away from the feeling that perhaps now the day of reckoning might be at hand.

His chauffeur had been told nothing, save that he was to stop at the crossroads. He did so, drawing up alongside the two-seater.

To the millionaire's surprise, an old lady got out of the smaller car and came mincingly towards him. He thought at first that

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she was some unfortunate person who had lost her way, and as the bent figure advanced towards him some of his courage returned. The old woman advanced to the window beside which the financier was sitting. Her face was almost hidden by a scarf and her voice chilled him immediately. It was the same soft, terrifying tone he had heard across the wire.

"Give it to me, please," she said softly, and at the same time dropped a red rosebud onto his lap.

The effect of her strange appearance flabbergasted the man, and quite simply he handed her the parcel and leaned back in his seat, stirring himself only enough to signal to his chauffeur to turn and go back.

Meanwhile, the strange old lady with the curiously youthful eyes had returned to her car, tossed the brown paper parcel into the back, and then leapt into the driving seat with surprising agility, and the next moment was speeding away up the North Road as if she had not a care in the world.

The police trap, having received no instructions, did not attempt to stop her, and she sailed past them without any trouble. Once out of sight she increased speed, and took to the lonely roads, the little, winding lanes that led her through small towns and half-forgotten villages until any attempt to follow her would have been impossible, and then, at the sanctuary of a little cottage where an old woman, a friend of her Wellside days, awaited her, she pulled up. And fifteen minutes later Betty Connolly, her disguise removed, drove, smiling and chic as ever, on her way towards Derry Hall.

It was late that evening before Betty and Marie could compare notes. It was only when they were up in the great oak bedroom in Derry Hall, the leaping firelight making strange shapes on the ceiling and deepening the shadows among the silken drapery of the old four-poster bed, that the two girls were able to talk. Marie's eyes were shining.

"Oh, Miss Betty," she said, "what a wonderful idea. It was a brainwave thinking of the second red Daimler. You should have seen Mr. Kempis's face when he got to the police trap and found it was me that they had held up. I did everything just as you told me. I explained that when we reached the crossroads I saw my young man, who is a chauffeur, alone in his master's car. He called me over and gave me a box of chocolates for my birthday present.

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"I showed the police the chocolates. They searched the car, though, and Roberts, Lady Derry's new chauffeur, was furious, but of course, he bore me out in my story because he had seen my boy give me the sweets. Roberts didn't know he wasn't a real chauffeur and that we had hired the car, so, of course, at last they let us go on."

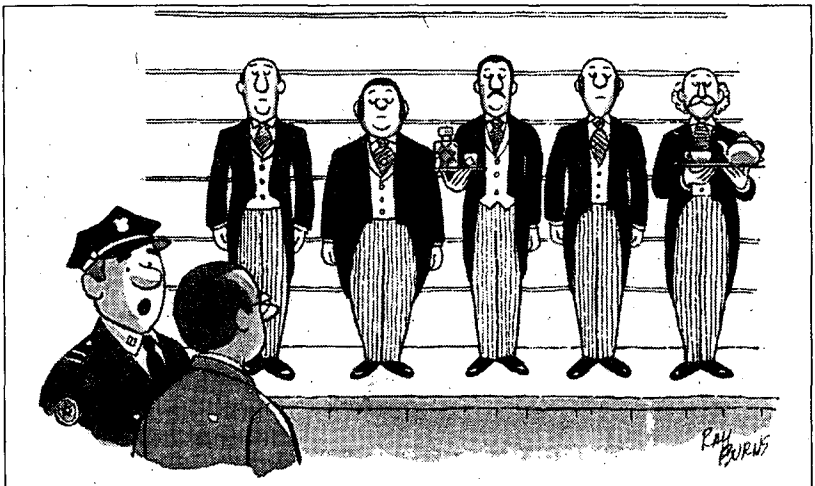
Betty laughed and nodded. "Marie, if you'd seen that horrible man shaking all over like a jelly when he handed me the notes, even though he thought I was a poor old woman, you'd have had hysterics," she said. "We'll get the money off to the Wellside Fund in a day or two, when the excitement has died down. Meanwhile, the police can go on hunting for the lady who drives so well; and good luck to them."

The two girls went on laughing and talking until suddenly Marie glanced at her young mistress shrewdly.

"It's a pity about Mr. Kempis, isn't it, miss?" she said. "It seems as if he's on the wrong side."

Betty nodded, and a shadow passed over her face.

"Oh, I wish, Marie—" she began, and checked herself. "No," she said resolutely. "I won't think of him. I won't think of love until my work is done. And now, Marie, if you'll bring me the book, I want to make a small but satisfactory tick against the name of financier number four." ●



"We've rounded up the usual suspects . . ."

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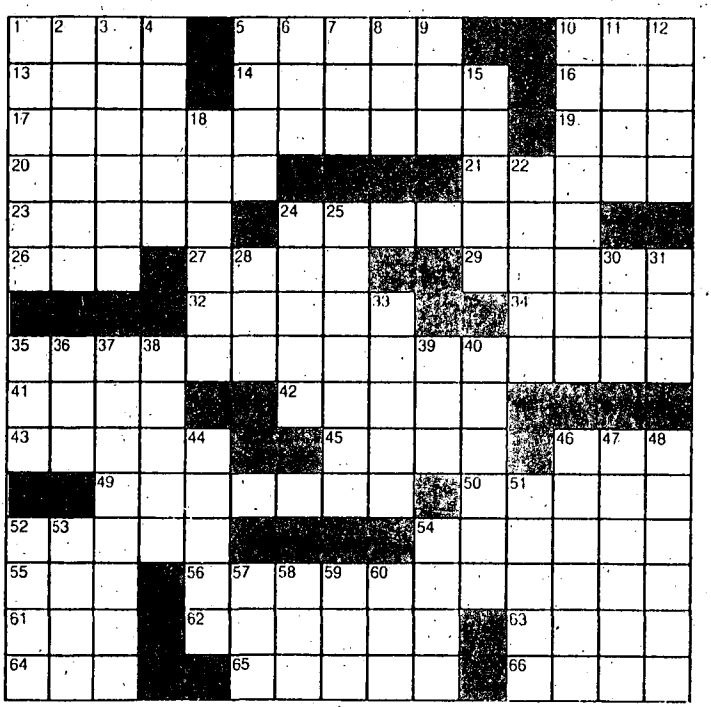
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Nearest and Dearest

by Leigh Woznick



Solution on page 142

ACROSS

1. Coyote's supplier
5. Landscaper's staple
10. Haggard's white goddess
13. Atlantic City coin vacuum
14. Gives a wide berth
16. Fabric lump
17. How-to victim (D. Cannell)
19. Past
20. Within reach
21. Colorado hotspot
23. Displays grief

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24. Too many, for D. G. Browne
26. Stray
27. Old Irish garment
29. Old Testament prophet
32. French watchman
34. Place for a pig
35. Jealous sibling, to Mason (E. S. Gardner)
41. Murdered relative (C. H. Kitchin or R. Hull)
42. Hunter constallation
43. Oblivion
45. Did away with
46. Evergreen
49. Permit once more
50. Ridiculous
52. —— Zagora (Bulgarian city)
54. Mystery award
55. Maron's is bloody
56. "Here Departed" one —— (S. Phillips)
61. Ambulance empl.
62. Ichor
63. Prison sentence
64. Actor Studi
65. Dutch or wicked (P. Moyes/P. Wentworth)
66. God of war

DOWN

1. Need —— (crave a cigarette)
2. Solitary reproducer?
3. The hunted one (R. Stout)
4. Wharton's Frome
5. Before boiled, in mysteries
6. Egg (comb. form)
7. Progeny of Fletch or Holmes (G. Mcdonald/ J. Lescroart)
8. Up to
9. Dentist's grp.
10. Contribution to family album (L. Barnes)
11. Brobdingnagian
12. Black, poetically
15. Suitor
18. Naval commission
22. Acts the turtle
24. Kernel (comb. form)
25. Have food delivered
28. Scottish negative
30. Hawaiian guitar, for short
32. Before man or maid
33. Command
35. Guy's go-with
36. Morgue of Dupin's debut
37. Contest hopefuls
38. Anesthetic
39. Wooden tub (obs.)
40. *Dress Her in* —— (J. MacDonald)
44. Exclamation for Watson?
46. Sinful parent (R. Rendell)
47. Response to locating query
48. Fortifies again
51. Italian chemist
52. Distort
53. Daughter's lineage (J. Tey)
54. Eliza's expletive
57. Vichy water
58. Hoofer Miller
59. Rocker Ocasek
60. Ten decibels

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All Keyed Up

by George Baxt

It wasn't unusual for Harry Lobo to prowl the permanent set of the soap opera he produced, *May Madness,* hours after the cast and crew had departed. Dead cigar clenched between discolored teeth, hands clasped behind his back, he walked bent forward as though fighting a strong wind. That wasn't what he was fighting. His battle was with the sponsors and the network. Earlier that day he'd been under verbal siege in the office of Jennifer Hockmeister, vice president in charge of daytime programming.

"Face it, Harry," she rasped while attacking a fingernail with a worn emery board, "your ratings are way down. They're this far"—holding thumb and index finger a hair apart—"from total collapse. Well? No excuses? No alibis?" There was nothing subtle about Jennifer's sadism. There never was and there never would be. She banged her way to her current seat of power by wheeling, cajoling, blackmailing, threatening, and, on two occasions, bribery. There were those who hinted she was a past master at bedroom diplomacy. Harry Lobo didn't believe it. He found her downright homely and physically repulsive, though her record of three previous marriages refuted Harry's assessment of the woman. "Well, what are you going to do?"

New Yorker George Baxt is one of the most prolific writers in the crime field. A new novel in his Pharoah Love series, *A Queer Kind of Umbrella,* is now available from Simon & Schuster, and coming up early in 1996 from St. Martin's Press is a new entry in his celebrity series, *The William Powell and Myrna Loy Murder Case.* Readers who want to follow the Pharoah Love series in paperback should look for the first book, *A Queer Kind of Love,* from St. Martin's Press. ¶

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"I don't know." His sudden attack of honesty took both of them by surprise.

She tossed the emery board on the desk, sat back with arms folded across her chest, and studied his creased face. "You've been in soaps a long time, Harry. You had a string of winners. Nobody could touch you."

Her litany sounded like a eulogy being delivered at his funeral, and for a chilling moment he wondered if he had died.

"But you know as well as I do, networks aren't interested in past performances. It's *now* that counts. What you are delivering *now.*" She slammed a hand on the desk. "Harry! You're losing too much steam!" She was on her feet and pacing the floor, eyes ablaze and nostrils quivering. "We've got to rescue *May Madness*. The truth is, we've got nothing to replace it." Sweet music to Harry's ears. Nothing to replace it. Anybody to replace him? "The network still thinks you can rescue the show. Put some juice into it. Get it back on its feet." Rescue the invalid. Give it some transfusions. Harry was thinking hard.

"Jonas Leigh." He spoke the name of the serial's major male lead with a subtle underlined hint of loathing.

"He's still getting a lot of strong fan mail. What do you have in mind?"

"He's hiding a terrible secret."

"Oh, please, Harry. Not AIDS again." She was at a window staring out at the traffic below, watching the people swarming about the street, wondering why they weren't at home tuned in to *May Madness*.

"He's a cross-dressing serial killer."

"Jonas? A cross dresser? With those shoulders? For crying out loud, he's built like a football player! You can't put him in a dress!"

"There's a law against it?"

"It's positively ludicrous." She paused and gave the idea a bit more thought. "He won't sit still for that. He won't go for it. His fans will hate it." She added cruelly, "His drinking is getting way out of hand. He's going to get into one brawl too many, one too many. And not another serial killer, oh please God not another one. They're proliferating like biographies of Scott Fitzgerald."

"They're a fact of life. Wait! Wait!" He was on his feet glowing with unoriginality. "He's *not* a serial killer."

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"He doesn't qualify?"

"He's a serial *rapist!* Sexy! Very sexy!"

"Hmm." Jennifer was rubbing her chin as though she thought she might need a shave.

Harry plowed onward. "That gives the show a whole new fresh story line. A serial rapist. And we keep his identity hidden for months while others take the fall for him and our ratings keep going up up up! Think of it, Jennifer, sex and horror, what could be better?"

"Hmmmm." She was back seated behind the desk. "Let's give it a shot. Go for it. Get the writers on a story line right away. You see, Harry, when you really put your mind to it you can deliver the goods instead of spending so much time pining away for Beryl."

"I'm not pining away for her."

"You're pining. I know pining when I see it. I've pined away in my time. I'm human."

Ha! thought Harry and then dwelt on Beryl Tansey, the star of the serial for the past fifteen years, the last five years spent sharing Harry's bed while her frantic husband kept an army of private detectives solvent.

Jennifer was droning on about Beryl. "Why'd you let yourself get mixed up with her?"

"She was there."

"She's a mean bitch. Everybody in the business hates her. That's why she never wins any awards. The business has made a career of voting against her. Has she gone back to her husband?"

"Beryl only moves forward. She's with Jonas now."

"You're kidding! What about his wife?"

"She's with Beryl's husband."

"For crying out loud, it's musical chairs! All this is bound to come out in the supermarket tabloids!"

"Let us hope." Harry sat with his hands folded in his lap. "A little rotten scandal could go a long way in boosting the show's ratings."

Jennifer's face was suddenly aglow. "You know, you're right! You're absolutely right! We've been too damned squeaky clean! That's what we need. Some notoriety. Leak it to the tabloids!"

"It's already been leaked. With pictures."

"What kind of pictures?"

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"Incriminating, embarrassing pictures. Bought for a handsome price from some unscrupulous and unreliable private eyes."

"Are there any other kind?"

"There's one of me and Beryl on a dune in East Hampton. That took place when we first got the hots for each other. I photograph amazingly well. Beryl looks a little sandy but enthusiastic."

"I wish she'd put some of that enthusiasm into her performance. She's losing her sparkle."

"She's not getting any younger." He said it with undisguised relish.

"Have a talk with her. Hint you're thinking of a new story line without her character."

"I've already used that one. I shall have the good taste not to repeat what she told me to do with that new story line."

"Harry," said Jennifer, her approach and her voice suspiciously warm and ingratiating, "why not consider a new story line that eliminates her character." She was back on her feet, enthusing volubly. "She's the rapist's first victim. He abuses her so horrifyingly that she's left in a coma, and . . ." He thought she was about to start drooling. ". . . we keep her in that coma for months and months and months." He was surprised she wasn't rubbing the palms of her hands together greedily, although the pupils of her eyes were abnormally dilated and her lips were trembling.

"We can't eliminate her while a public scandal is about to break, but we could put her in a hospital and keep her there with a series of relapses." He was warming up to the idea. "There she lies, always in fear the rapist will return and finish her off once and for all."

"Unless we beat him to it."

"You're so bloodthirsty."

"I'll do anything to keep this show from going under and folding. It's Mrs. Longbrake's favorite." She was the wife of the network president. "Harry, this was a very productive meeting. I was afraid it might go in the other direction. We did good work. Scandal, a serial rapist, and whatever other nastiness comes to mind. Get to work, Harry, I want to burst out singing again!"

* * *

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Harry spent all afternoon with the two head writers, the ones who wrote the story line and then passed it along to the scene and dialogue writers. Sibyl Dare and Erwin Holt had been soap writers for over two decades. It was said they could write *May Madness* in their sleep and sometimes the show sounded as if they had. Sibyl looked like a longshoreman and Erwin was the motherly type. Sibyl wrote the scenes of strong conflicts and climaxes and Erwin excelled at romance and misunderstood teenagers. No one believed he had sired six children, and there were those who suspected their conceptions had taken place when Mrs. Holt was under sedation. When Harry told them the next story line would favor a sadistic serial rapist who would send Beryl's character into a hospital for months, Sibyl jumped up and hugged him. Erwin said, "Oh dear!" and unscrewed a vial of smelling salts and waved it under his nose. An hour later, the two writers had roughed out the sequence of events involving the rapist and the cast of the soap. Harry was terribly pleased. Jennifer was terribly pleased. But several hours later, when Harry had Beryl Tansey and Jonas Leigh in his office to advise them of the soap's new and degenerate direction, they were neither of them pleased. In fact, they were pretty nasty and vociferous about it, personalizing to an extent that made Harry boil over with anger.

"I am not being vengeful! I don't give a damn that you two are shacked up! We need this new story to shore up our sagging foundation! It's what Jennifer Hockmeister wants, and what Jennifer wants the network wants! We're in the cellar and we've got to climb out!"

"You're ruining me before my public!" shouted Jonas Leigh. "They won't accept me as a rapist!"

"Why not? You've been abusing women on the show for fifteen years and getting away with it."

"But all those times were romantic!"

Beryl stepped in. "You think you're going to keep me confined to a hospital room indefinitely?"

"It'll be the best private suite, of course," reasoned Harry.

Beryl showered him with numerous unprintables while Jonas availed himself of Harry's private stock of Russian vodka. Harry cautioned him, "Go easy, Jonas. The doctor's warned you about your liver." Jonas told Harry what he could do with his liver, but Harry was coolly unagreeable.

Beryl shouted, "My lawyers will be talking to you!"

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Harry leaned across his desk towards the two of them, a powerful and dangerous puma about to leap out and strike. Slowly, coldly, ominously, he reminded them, "Your contracts are ironclad. You don't call the shots. We do."

Beryl said haughtily, "I could be taken seriously ill."

"I seriously doubt that. You've got the constitution of an ox, as I know from experience."

Beryl raged, "I should never have slept with you!"

"That's what my mother said before her fatal stroke," Harry told her. "And as for you, Jonas Leigh, I saved you from a fate worse than death." He lied gracefully, "I rescued you from a long series of sequences as a cross-dresser."

Jonas's eyes brightened. "Who would have designed my outfits?"

Harry exhaled. He shook his head from side to side and muttered under his breath, "Actors." Then he wondered how they would react to the impending scandal when it broke in the tabloids. He didn't want to think about it at length. He didn't have to. Jonas had downed four vodkas in rapid succession and now he and Beryl were at each other's throats. Harry fled to the bathroom crying, "Sanctuary!" while the argument escalated. Harry held his wrists under cooling tap water and then heard the unmistakable sound of a fist connecting with a jaw and the heavy thud of a body falling. He rushed out of the bathroom and saw Beryl standing over Jonas, fist still clenched, while Jonas rubbed his jaw amidst a stream of ungentlemanly epithets. Harry was impressed by Beryl's clenched fist and the unsuspected power it contained. "Beryl!" he exclaimed as though she might have forgotten her name.

"Men!" she shouted. "I hate men!" With which she stormed out of the room, forgetting to slam the door shut for emphasis. Harry's secretary stood staring into the room but Harry waved her away, indicating she first close the door. This she did reluctantly, treasuring the sight of one of her heroes stretched out on the floor, rubbing his chin, awed at the thought he'd been decked by a woman.

Harry helped Jonas to his feet and decided a fifth vodka would be therapeutic. Jonas muttered ominously, "I'm going to kill her! I'm going to kill the bitch! I'm going to kill her!" His eyes were wild as his hands made threatening feints, pausing only to accept the drink from Harry and downing it in one ferocious gulp that brought on a fit of coughing, after which Jonas sank into a

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chair and resumed the threats against Beryl's life. Harry remained silent, waiting for Jonas's motor of threatened revenge to run down. Jonas finally went quiet, staring into space without seeing.

When Jonas spoke again, he said, "I should never have gotten mixed up with her. She's bad news. You knew she was bad news, Harry, why didn't you warn me?"

"I wanted you to suffer the way I suffered." Jonas stared at him. "I knew she was bad news but I could handle her. Her lover. And her producer. Well, Jonas, I made my bed and you slept in it. Now start psyching yourself into the mind of a serial rapist. Why don't you go home and get some rest."

"She'll be there."

"She'll be all calmed down by the time you get home." Harry knew it would be hours before Jonas got home, if at all. There were a lot of saloons between the TV studio and Beryl's apartment on Central Park South. And for Beryl's sake, Harry hoped Jonas would take a long time getting to the apartment in which he too had known some happy moments with Beryl, like when they filled paper bags with water and dropped them out the window on innocent pedestrians below. Gee, there were times when he and Beryl really knew how to have fun.

Harry and Beryl truly enjoyed and loved each other. Until *May Madness* entrapped them. Until they could only think soap opera and audience ratings and fresh and original story lines, something they would never realize didn't exist in daytime television. Beryl was occupied with memorizing three to five scripts a week, though teleprompters were available. Harry was possessed by the need to keep his company off their backs and on their toes, keeping the show fresh and the cast lively and appealing. Fighting for publicity to keep the show perpetually in the public's eye.

Publicity.

Scandal.

Tabloids.

Harry groaned. What good was the scandal if two of the main protagonists were now at each other's throats? He poured himself a vodka. His secretary buzzed him to tell him she was going home, the company had finished for the day. And so Harry was now prowling the permanent set, dead cigar clenched between his teeth, hands behind his back, trembling. He knew his writers

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would come through. Sibyl and Erwin were rocks, absolute rocks. But something had to be done to that vast legion of television viewers who were either no longer watching the soap or just tuning in sporadically.

He found himself in the publicity office staring at the framed pictures on the walls, scenes from a variety of episodes from years back. Was Beryl ever that young? She was still beautiful, but today's beauty had been nipped and tucked into submission. Jonas Leigh in his younger days stripped to the waist as often as possible. Nowadays he was too flabby. His stomach had to be held in with a specially constructed cincher and those once-impressive pectorals were a physical shambles, the equivalent of a retired burlesque queen's sagging breasts.

Harry's hands were in his jacket pockets, one playing with his set of keys. He stared at a picture of Beryl from five years ago, when he was paying court and won her, to everyone's astonishment including his own. She wasn't a monster then. If she was, he wasn't aware. She was always written of as "the very popular and very much beloved soap opera star." When did it all become so tainted? He left the office and returned to his own. He stared at the floor where Jonas Leigh had lain in a semi-drunken stupor, nursing his jaw. He had no idea Beryl could pack such a punch. She had never raised a finger against him nor he against her. Was there always violence in her?

Out in the street he tried to make up his mind what to do next. Jonas Leigh was to be a serial rapist and he knew it would go over big. Beryl would be condemned to a hospital room, very little to be seen of her, probably very soon to be written out of the show forever.

He looked in the window of the show's favorite hangout, a cafe owned by two occasional cast members. Jonas was seated at the bar staring into a glass of vodka. Harry drew his coat collar tighter around his neck. He was feeling the chill. His thoughts were calm and collected. He hurried away.

Beryl Tansey's murder shocked the country. Worse, it shocked the network. An anonymous phone call sent the police to Beryl's apartment where they found her body, a silk stocking tightly drawn around her throat. Lying in bed fast asleep, in a drunken stupor, they found Jonas Leigh. When they finally roused him, he seemed stunned rather than shocked by the sight of Beryl's

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dead body. The police took Jonas into custody as the most likely suspect and Jonas yelled for Harry Lobo. Harry and Jennifer Hockmeister and Harry's secretary rushed to the police precinct where a powerful lawyer met them, already getting bail set for Jonas. Harry and Jennifer protested strongly and loudly that Jonas couldn't have murdered Beryl, he wasn't the type, and Harry's secretary volunteered the information that Beryl must have been much stronger than Jonas because she had decked him in her boss's office. Harry flashed her a filthy look and the powerful lawyer guided her away from the police who were interrogating Jonas, albeit fruitlessly. Jonas could remember nothing of what had happened the previous night. As usual, he had blacked out and if he had actually killed Beryl, there were no witnesses.

The media had a field day. Jonas staunchly insisted the show must go on and, although there was no episode aired that day (although there were at least three weeks' of them on tape) out of respect to Beryl Tansey, the following day the ratings went through the roof. Happily, it highlighted a steamy love scene between Beryl and Jonas, which, though gruesome, gave great joy to millions of prurient and bloodthirsty viewers and especially to Jennifer Hockmeister, her superiors at the network, and Harry Lobo.

The show was saved. The tabloids broke their stories to add fuel to the fire and for months, with an actress flown in from Hollywood to replace Beryl's glamorous presence, the soap survived. The actress took the new role of a beautiful police inspector, while Beryl's character was dismissed as having been murdered by the rapist. Soon Jonas and the replacement were romantically involved and Harry had the publicity staff make the most of it.

Harry's yearly salary was increased and Jennifer Hockmeister was given a bigger office in addition to more money. For a while the police pressed on with trying to find Beryl's murderer. There had been no forced entrance to the apartment. Either Beryl knew the murderer and admitted him, or the perp had a key. How many keys to the apartment existed? There was Beryl's and Jonas Leigh's, there was the housekeeper and a maid, but they were never under suspicion.

Happily for Harry, the police never thought of asking him if he still owned a key to the apartment he had formerly shared with Beryl Tansey. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A PLACE TO HIDE

by Ghaskey McElroy

"I guess I yielded to temptation."

That's what he said: "Yielded to temptation." Considering the amount of temptation he had yielded to during the time I had known him, the admission sounded a little unnecessary, or a little late. But even I had to admit that the temptation he had decided to yield to this time was more spectacular than average.

The suitcase had had hundred-dollar bills in it. It was crammed so full that one of the latches had sprung. He'd forced the other latch, dumped most of the money someplace safe, then dropped two bundles of bills on one side of a nearby fence, and tossed the empty suitcase over the other side.

The story he made up for the wholesalers who mailed him his monthly kickback, about a fleeing figure that he'd lost in the dark, must have sounded pretty thin. They didn't mind dealing with a crooked cop, but they expected him to be honest about it.

Our genre has a long tradition of professors turned mystery writers in their spare time, and some of the most popular of them have plied their criminous trade under a pseudonym (Nicholas Blake, for instance, was known in the academic world as C. Day Lewis). Our latest Department of First Stories author is a professor at a Midwestern university. His chosen pseudonym derives from a family legend. †

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And they expected service during a drug raid. Some merchandise could be seized, some payments confiscated; they understood about that. It was all part of their public relations budget. But they didn't expect a suitcase full of hundred-dollar bills to disappear. And any employee who happened to be in the vicinity during a disappearance like that was automatically a poor insurance risk.

So now Barney was a marked man. That was another one of his phrases—"a marked man." Imminent death and the acid taste of fear apparently expressed themselves in cliches, the lowest common denominators of experience.

He'd come to me to get himself unmarked. He wanted me to get him out of town; he mentioned Tucson, but what he really meant was someplace a long way away where nobody would know him by sight—someplace with plenty of crowds and a fairly gracious standard of living, where he could enjoy the fruits of his particular forbidden tree in unthreatened anonymity. He offered me ten thousand dollars for the service.

It was a stupid plan, and I told him so. He hitched himself forward in the garage-sale chair I keep for clients and said, "Twenty thousand, then. Listen, I'm not going to haggle." He wet his lips, just like they do in the old gangster movies. "Nobody else is going to help me. You know that. You know what they're like. But you're different, you're honest. I know we had that trouble before, but . . ."

He choked on that one. I wondered how he was going to get around the "trouble" that got me thrown off the police force after I refused to ditch some evidence in a drug case. He'd signed the papers that got me fired for insubordination.

He didn't even try to get around it. He appealed to my higher nature instead. "But man, it's my *life*. You can't just look the other way and let me die. They'll *kill* me. You gotta help me."

With his blue-eyed good looks and his Grecian-formula touch of gray, Barney normally looked like a successful politician, or an advertisement for a police fund raiser. But when he dealt with a suspect in an interrogation room at the station, he brought back memories of schoolyard bullies at recess. Now, with the smell of fear on him like a cloak and all the starch of his arrogance dissolving in the beads of sweat that formed as fast as he could wipe them off his forehead, he was merely pathetic. I could see the fat where he had let himself go soft, and

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the lines of indecision around a weak mouth. He was listening so hard for the sounds of footsteps at his back that for a moment he had no time left for the niceties of appearance. All that remained was a man vulnerable to his own past.

I'm a sucker for stray dogs and drowning kittens. If he'd kept pleading like that he might have softened me up. Luckily he straightened up and remembered what a rich man he was.

"Besides, I can make it worth your while." He looked around the ten-by-twelve room I call an office. My receptionist is a twenty-dollar answering machine from K-Mart and the window has a cracked pane that's been on my list of major capital improvements for a year now.

"I can make it thirty thousand. That's all the money I've got right now, honest to God. The rest of it's stashed away where I can't touch it." He inspired all the confidence of a used-car salesman making his final offer.

I wondered how much I could squeeze him for. It was tempting to try. Thirty thousand dollars looked like Aladdin's cave to a private detective who had to make monthly choices between eating and paying the rent. But if I'd gotten him too high, I might really have been tempted, and even a lucrative stupid idea is still a stupid idea.

"No way. You drop out of sight and they're going to find you. Maybe sooner, maybe later, but they'll get you. And somewhere along the way they'll probably get me too. I don't want to be buried with thirty thousand dollars."

It took me awhile to get rid of him, and by the time he left he'd managed to locate another twenty thousand that he'd forgotten he had. By the end he'd gotten back to pleading again, too, but I hardened my heart. You have to stay alive to spend money.

I slept soundly that night. I'd like to think it was my clear conscience, but it was probably the scotch. I celebrated all the wealth I'd been offered with a liter of Scoresby I couldn't afford. It was my way of showing I didn't need all that money anyway.

I woke up with a stomach that wouldn't accept breakfast and a headache that followed me around the room and out into the street. I spent the morning finishing up a repo job for Eliot's, a collection agency that specialized in tracing out-of-town deadbeats. This job came out of Chicago, as usual. Some optimist had bounced a check there and then driven the Chevy he'd

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bought with it across the state line into my hometown. He hadn't even tried to do anything to the VIN number by the time I found it parked in his driveway. I'd get a dime out of every dollar Eliot's charged, enough to pay a couple of days' rent on the office if I was lucky. It was a good thing Chicago was only a couple of hours away; I'd have starved a lot more quickly without all the business it threw my way.

By noon, I was unemployed again. I went back to the office because the phone there is free, and dialed the number Barney had left me as I'd pushed him out the door.

"Barney. It's me. I've got an idea."

"You'll do it for me? Oh man, I knew I could count on you! I—"

"Not a chance. You're a bad judge of character. But like I said, I've got an idea."

There was a silence on the other end of the line. Maybe he didn't like being interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"Your pen pals with the expensive luggage want you dead, right? You drop out of sight and they still want you dead; it just takes a little longer that way."

"So what's your idea? I don't like being dead."

"Too bad, because that's my idea. We make you dead, and then they stop looking."

Another silence, but maybe I'd earned this one. "You're a lousy comedian. You call me just to heckle?"

I tried hard to make my voice sound earnest and trustworthy, because I didn't want him to hang up on me just then. "No comedy. I've got a plan. If they think you're dead, then they're not looking for you, right? So the heat's off. *Then* you can drop out of sight, go someplace sunny, and live happily ever after. You're happy, they're happy, I'm happy. Everybody wins."

I held my breath. He could still hang up, and I hadn't paid for that liter of Scoresby yet.

There was a harsh laugh from the other end, but it was a little shaky, with too much breath in it to make it really effective. He'd started to hope. I relaxed a little.

"Okay, so what's your big plan?"

"I want to talk about it, but not on the phone. When can we meet?"

"Hell, right now. I'm at my sister's house. Come on—"

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"I don't want anybody to see us together, and they've probably got somebody on you." I was beginning to enjoy interrupting him. "You're going to have to sneak out tonight; and do it right—I don't want any company."

It took me awhile to convince him, but by the time I'd finished I knew he was hooked. I was his one shining hope for the good life—or any life, I guess.

I picked him up that night behind the Bonne Terre on King Street. It was the kind of place that cops and their customary prey don't frequent: a menu full of overpriced health food, and crime that came in the white-collar variety only. It was a safe neighborhood for a short walk and a quick pickup.

When he got in the car I didn't even look at him. The hope of a drowning man is too painful an emotion to share.

The ignition on my five-year-old Ford is a little tricky, and I made sure I had trouble starting it; I gave it a long thirty seconds just to make him nervous before I finally turned the key over hard and revved the engine.

I let a couple of minutes of bright lights and traffic noise go by before I started talking. "How long have you got?"

He gave that same laugh I'd heard over the phone; it was getting hoarser now. "All night. Somehow I've had trouble sleeping lately."

"Not that. How long do you figure before they kill you?"

I could see the brutality of that register out of the corner of my eye. I could hear him breathing.

"Three days. Maybe five."

"Why so long?" I was genuinely interested; it seemed like a long time just to put a few bullets in the guy.

"They w—" He stopped and swallowed. "They won't use local talent to kill a cop. Word has it that they're importing some connections from L.A."

"Yeah. I can see that local talent wouldn't work." The last local talent I'd seen was Barney—shooting some kid in the back for shorting his distributions. He'd done it on orders, and they'd supplied him with a stolen 9mm. to put the kid's fingerprints on. It went down in the books as an officer's response to deadly force; a neighborhood association had presented Barney with an official letter of recognition. "Still, it gives us some time."

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"Time for what?" He was getting impatient. "You wanted to talk about your great plan, so talk."

I ignored him. "I'm going to need your wallet. Don't leave any money in it; you'd just tempt me to pocket it. But ID, driver's license, old business cards, anything a jacked-up operator wouldn't take if he was in a hurry. And something else. We've got to have somebody to identify your body. Who can you trust?"

He didn't even hesitate. He must have been thinking about it already. "Joan. My sister. She's listed as next of kin, anyway; the coroner would want her."

"How sure are you she won't blow it?"

"She gets a quarter of a million in life insurance."

No messing around with sisterly affection or family loyalty; he went right for the motives that matter. It must have been some family.

"Good. I'll need a letter from her or a note or something. It has to have her address on it, and they have to be able to tell she's your sister. It needs to fit in the wallet."

He nodded. "Okay. I can do that. But—"

"Just be ready to move when I give you a call. Once it's set, I'm going to have to get you out of town in a hurry." I let the engine stall and made an operation out of restarting it. "I'll drive you straight through to Tucson if I have to, but maybe someplace closer would be better." I looked over at him with as much frank innocence as I could muster.

He took the bait. "Well, you'd damn well better get a car that'll run. I'm not going anywhere in this thing."

I looked irritated and took the next turn too fast. My voice turned surly. "All right, I'll get another damn car. Don't worry about it." I slammed on the brakes; he was lucky he was wearing a seat belt. "This is where you get out. Talk to your sister. And I expect that fifty thousand when she's identified the body. *Before* we go anywhere. Now get lost until I call you."

He opened the door, then turned back toward me. In the shadows of the dome light, his face was a mask, with dark hollows for eyes and teeth glinting behind invisible lips. A death mask. A skull. Sometimes nature imitates art. "But what are you going to do about the body?"

"Let me worry about that."

I pulled away from the curb fast. He barely had time to close the door.

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* * *

The next night I was in Chicago.

The routine I'd planned out wasn't difficult, just tedious. And nerve-wracking, too, because time was so short. I plotted a grid in the area of the east side that I figured was most likely to turn up the right kind of corpse, and drove with the radio tuned to the police bands.

It was the sort of thing the video vultures do every night, cruising for something that will titillate the bloodthirsty audiences of the evening news. But it takes a freelancer maybe a week to turn up two minutes of taped atrocity he can sell to the TV station; I only had a couple of days. So I sweated.

I had one advantage they didn't, of course. I didn't need anything spectacular for the eleven o'clock news—just a humdrum killing, preferably a mugging, of a middle-aged white male whose description wouldn't shock the coroner when he read Barney's driver's license. I kept reminding myself of that and tried to keep my eyes off the dashboard clock and my mind off the calendar.

I got my break the second night: a white male, dead in an alley behind a bar he shouldn't have been in in the first place. I picked up the call to the first patrol car when I was only about three blocks away. I actually got there before they did, but I parked down the street and waited; I wanted to be on the scene, not get myself questioned as a possible witness.

At three minutes I started to get itchy. I didn't want the area cluttered up with bystanders, and other people own police-band radios. But Chicago's finest lived up to their press that night; at three and a half minutes, six minutes after the original call, they rolled up. One squad car, two cops. From my point of view it couldn't have been better; two cops are not enough for a crime scene—they'd be too busy to pay much attention to me.

I let them get into the alley, then went into my act. I lugged my rented camcorder to the scene of the crime and started filming. The light they'd given me at the rental place was meant for suburban birthday parties, not east-side alleys without a public utilities budget, but it was good enough to tell me what I needed to know: The guy lying there with blood on his face and eternity in his eyes was close enough to Barney's age and weight.

The light was bright enough to attract some legal attention, too. One of the cops headed my way—a heavy guy, more muscle

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than fat, with tired eyes that only blinked a little at the blue-white glare I directed into them. He had harsh words to say to me, but I asked him some probing journalistic questions anyway, just to stay in character. He didn't have any more answers than I did; the guy was a John Doe with no wallet and no ID. I let him overcome my resistance and drive me back to the front of the alley. On the way there, I took what they call "establishing" shots of the scene of the crime; it gave me a good excuse to shine my rental light around some more.

What I saw was the customary urban squalor: fast-food wrappers, paper cups, old cigarette butts, new beer cans, bright shards of glass from dozens of defunct and nameless bottles, a dead rat that had eaten something that disagreed with him. Two trash cans were overturned near the end of the alley.

My luck kept running. I picked a spot to ditch Barney's wallet—near the trash cans, where a night artist might have tossed it after he'd cleaned out the cash. Three feet away was the spot where he *had* tossed it: polished black leather gleamed my own light back at me from the cabbage leaves and cellophane.

Two minutes later I was back on the street and rolling. Barney was a dead man amid the stench and debris of Chicago's mean streets, and John Doe nestled securely in the pocket of my windbreaker.

The next part was easy. I found a phone booth where the vandals had stopped short of ripping the receiver out, and gave Barney a call. I kept it short and sweet: get the money, get packed, and tell his sister she was going to Chicago to look at a dead man. I didn't have to tell her to make it good; she'd be giving a quarter-million-dollar performance.

It worked. They picked her name off the letter in Barney's wallet, and she was the perfect picture of shocked grief at a Chicago morgue the next morning. Nobody asked any embarrassing questions, the coroner signed all the necessary papers, and sister Joan got the body released to her. She buried it in indecent haste—closed casket and no mourners. The whole thing was over inside forty-eight hours.

Barney was dead, with his ill-gotten gains in untraceable cash and ready to spend. Somewhere there was an open missing person's file on my John Doe, but the cops are used to that: Scratch any citizen's daily life hard enough to see beneath the surface

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and you'll find plenty of plausible motives for a disappearance; only the relatives are ever surprised.

I met Barney at my place the night after his funeral. He made a jubilant corpse. I had champagne on ice in the leather-bound bucket that my ex-wife somehow forgot to take with her when she walked out. She hadn't forgotten the crystal, so we toasted our success in the oversized coffee mugs I use for everything liquid around the house.

I let him get one sip down, to satisfy my sense of hospitality, then raised the important question.

"Fifty grand, remember?" I extended a hand. "Now."

"You're an impatient bastard, you know that?" His ego was recovering. Being alive was making him the same unpleasant guy I'd known two years ago.

I snapped my fingers and turned the palm up. "It ain't over till it's over. Now."

He grinned. He probably thought it looked friendly. "Okay, okay. Keep your shorts on." He dug into an overcoat pocket. I'd already figured that particular bulge was either a gun or the money. I slid forward on the couch a little to get my feet under me.

"Here's to gratitude and old friends." He took a healthy slug from his cup and slapped three bundles of bills down on the old cigarette burns on the coffee table.

The stack wasn't thick enough. Gratitude is a plant that only flourishes in inclement weather, and Barney's climate had just turned unexpectedly sunny.

"Fifty thou, Barney, not thirty. Thirty won't get us to Tucson. Thirty won't even get us out the door."

His grin didn't even try to look friendly this time. But two more bundles appeared, and together they came about two-thirds of the way up the first stack. He looked a little tense.

I nodded, a nice friendly nod. "That looks about right."

"Why don't you count it," he snarled. He snarled better than he grinned; maybe he'd had more practice.

I nodded again, still friendly. "Sure thing. Since you insist."

I counted the way he expected me to, flipping the upper right corner of a packet the way a bank teller would. His eyes never left me.

I made a thorough job of it, just to irritate him.

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"Looks good to me." I stowed the bundles away, and made myself grin back at him. "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

He relaxed into a sneer and belted back the rest of his drink. The tension left him. "So let's get moving. I've got some money of my own to spend."

I wasn't ready for him to leave yet. "It's a shame to waste the champagne." I moved back to the table. "I've got to drive, but at least you can do the celebrating."

I poured him another drink. This one had two ounces of Everclear in the bottom, just like the first one.

Barney drank.

We left an hour and a pint of Everclear later. Barney could still walk, but he was having some trouble. I told him he just wasn't used to champagne.

When we got to the Chevy Beretta I'd rented, I made some unpleasant remarks just to remind him that he was the one who'd nixed using my Ford. I didn't want any uncharitable suspicions about why I'd changed cars. I needn't have bothered; he was passed out almost before I could get him into the passenger seat.

I drove west out of town, toward the Bluffs. There's a tangle of old farm roads there, some of them pretty bad. I picked one of the worst—a lane and a half of washboard and loose rock, with no guard rails and less traffic. It didn't have a name on any map, but locals called it the Bluff road, because of where it ran.

I'd already picked my spot. It was a hairpin curve, with 200 feet of sheer rock and fresh air on the other side. Experienced drivers approach it with care and respect. I approached it with no lights and a speedometer that read 5 miles per hour, and stopped about thirty feet from the edge.

I worked quickly in the dark; my worst fear was that some other idiot might be driving that road at night. Getting Barney across the gear shift into the driver's seat was the worst part; moving a drunk is like trying to get a grip on an amoeba—they're so relaxed they seem practically boneless. By the time I finished I was drenched with sweat, even in the cold night air, and I was surprised to find that I was shaking.

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The rest of it went a little easier. I dragged the three bottles of brandy that I'd bought the day before out of the backseat and emptied them over Barney's head and shoulders; then I shattered the empties so the glass would be scattered over the front seats, like they'd been smashed with the impact. I loosened the cap on the gas tank, and then used a screwdriver to twist the self-sealing flap on the intake so that it wouldn't close. For good measure, I poured a little gas around the opening. I almost forgot to put John Doe's wallet in Barney's hip pocket.

When I was finished, I stepped back to a respectful distance and lighted a cigarette. My hands were shaking so badly that I let myself finish it and light another one before I did what I had to do.

I let off the emergency brake, turned on the headlights, and put the Beretta in neutral. I lifted Barney's foot onto the accelerator; his body slid limply down in the seat and jammed the pedal down hard. I shut the door, reached through the window, slammed it into drive, and flipped my half-smoked cigarette into his lap. The last thing I saw as the Chevy lurched into the final darkness was the blue flames of the brandy making a sardonic halo around Barney's head.

It was a mile and a half through hard country back to the highway and my old Ford. Long before I got there I could hear the sirens wailing their urgent way toward the rising flames of John Doe's final resting place. I hoped I hadn't started a forest fire, but at least the size of the blaze was a guarantee that the body wouldn't be identifiable by its good looks.

The wallet should be safe, wedged between the body and the driver's seat; anybody who has ever tried to burn a book knows how hard it is to destroy tightly pressed paper. Besides, they'd still be able to identify the Beretta: I'd rented it three days ago in Chicago with John Doe's ID.

All that was left was the money. I took a good look at it under the dome light of the Ford. Barney had pulled an old wise-guy's trick, one they used to use on bank tellers at rush hour. A teller always counts from the upper right-hand corner of a packet, flipping through the bills to check the denominations. If you take a bunch of one-dollar bills, cut off the numerals in the upper right-hand corner, and paste the numerals from a ten or a twenty or a hundred in their place, then you get a stack of

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bills that have the look and feel of real cash and that seem to be all higher denominations. You have to sacrifice one large bill for every four smaller ones, and you have to put a real bill or two on the top and bottom of the stack to make it look right, but the net profit is still pretty high.

Barney had been extra cautious; he'd planted three real bills on the top and two on the bottom of each packet, just in case I got curious. Still he'd saved himself almost thirty-five thousand dollars that he could spend in that warm place he was heading for.

On the other hand, he'd also left me with twenty-five hundred in spendable money. Even after expenses, that worked out to a couple of thousand—not bad pay for a week's work in my business, even aside from the little glow of inner satisfaction at a job well done. All in all, I couldn't say I was disappointed; I'd never counted very heavily on Barney's good faith.

I started the car and headed for home. The cold night air was scented with the smoke of faded dreams. I figured I owed myself another bottle of Scoresby. ●

Solution To The Mystery Crossword

A	C	M	E	■	H	O	S	T	A	■	■	S	H	E
S	L	O	T	■	A	V	O	I	D	S	■	N	U	B
M	O	T	H	E	R	I	N	L	A	W	■	A	G	O
O	N	H	A	N	D	■	■	■	■	A	S	P	E	N
K	E	E	N	S	■	C	O	U	S	I	N	S	■	■
E	R	R	■	I	N	A	R	■	■	N	A	H	U	M
■	■	■	■	G	A	R	D	E	■	■	P	O	K	E
G	R	E	E	N	E	Y	E	D	S	I	S	T	E	R
A	U	N	T	■	■	O	R	I	O	N	■	■	■	■
L	E	T	H	E	■	■	I	C	E	D	■	F	I	R
■	■	R	E	G	R	A	N	T	■	I	N	A	N	E
S	T	A	R	A	■	■	■	■	A	G	A	T	H	A
K	I	N	■	D	E	A	R	B	R	O	T	H	E	R
E	M	T	■	S	A	N	I	E	S	■	T	E	R	M
W	E	S	■	■	U	N	C	L	E	■	A	R	E	S

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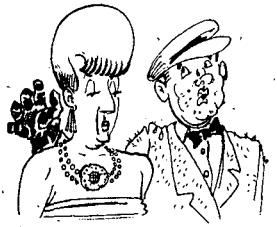

Art by Anthony Bari

In Remembrance

by Allan McArthur

Alfie was a funny bloke
Looked on life as just a joke
Every pound was promptly spent
Truth to tell, our Alf was bent
Used to find things that weren't lost
Never paused to count the cost
Lifted Lady Ashton's pearls
Spent the proceeds on bad girls
Drove off with an armored truck
Had a super run of luck
At the Yard, the air was blue
Poor clucks didn't have a clue
Gave the case to J. G. Reeder
Hoped that he would nab the bleeder
He, too, was a funny kind
Claimed to have a crook-type mind
Laid his trap, and it was cute
Our Alf went straight for the loot
Reeder held a little gun
Told Alfie, "I shouldn't run."
Alf, it seems, was over bold
Reckoned that his luck would hold
Made his move, and Reeder fired
Alfie bled, and then expired
All his cronies bought a stone
On it carved a little poem
"Goodbye, Alf, your luck ran out
Chin-up, you're not one to pout
We will join you presently
In the meantime, R. I. P."

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DIGITAL ARCHIVE
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Art by Steve Cavallo

CSOH

by Barbara Crossley

Men were in short supply in Meryl Henderson's little patch of life. She sweltered, bikini-bare, on the neat lawn of her bungalow, and contemplated her tight body, shrunken to bone-shape on Diet-Fast, while round her the roses drooped, swollen with fecundity.

Something was wrong. She'd rather be a rose than a bone. She needed a man to stroke and soothe her, to feed her cream and fat peaches and muscats, sweet-scented as the fine skin of his smooth belly. Mmmm. She lay back on her sun lounger, closed her eyes, and she could almost smell him, rising out of the air in the baking sun; her nose quivered and hovered like a bee over a blossom, suspending the pleasure of tonguing its depths. A shadow passed.

A freeze-sharp knife split her abdomen. She bolted upright, wet slithering down her thighs, and a cackle cut the torpid air.

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"Made you jump! Heee-he-heee-haaaa!"

The child whipped her plaited pigtails back and forth with delight, her smile wide and black through the gap in her front teeth.

"Your face looked so funny, Mummy, like a horrid—a horrid Halloween monster—whee-whoooooo!"

Not a knife, not blood, but ice cubes tossed by her gleeful daughter onto her naked stomach. Meryl petulantly picked them from between her thighs and threw them back, but they were melting fast, making a well out of her navel and leaving slime trails through her suntan lotion. Why couldn't Serena ever be tranquil? The only time she was quiet was when she was ill or asleep, and even then she'd grunt and moan and fling her arms and legs about in restless torment.

Then Meryl remembered: It was Saturday, and Serena wasn't even meant to be here. This was Meryl's time, her private indulgence, and she craved it desperately. She swivelled round, looking for someone else, her crocheted swimsuit clinging to her, clammy as a damp dishcloth, a look of annoyance across her face.

"Where's Daddy, Serena?"

"He had to drop me off early, he had business to do," replied her daughter importantly, and flopped down on her knees to plunge pudgy fingers in the garden pond, flushing shy koi carp into their rock-hides as she shattered the surface.

"Please, Serena—I've told you, fish don't like that," implored Meryl, feeling the fright in every startled scale. She couldn't bear to see creatures suffer, even house spiders, which she abhorred—she'd steel herself to catch them in a cup, toss them through the window, then throw the cup away. But Serena? Not

Barbara Crossley was born in Saddleworth, West Yorkshire, in the 1950s, where her family had run a moorland farm for 300 years. After graduating from Lancaster University she became a journalist in Blackpool, England, the location of many of her stories. The holiday-town setting is always perfectly realized in Ms. Crossley's fiction, for it's right at her doorstep. She lives in Blackpool with her husband, who is also a journalist. P

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only would she de-wing a dragonfly with absorption, but Meryl had once caught her stirring the goldfish with kitchen shears, bits of fin and tail spinning to the surface. Meryl's stark-faced reaction was what she sought, and Meryl couldn't help but give it—the horror sprang out unbidden—and Serena laughed as though it was a joke.

I'll bet Daddy had business to do, thought Meryl, sourly—no doubt involving a certain female. Her ex-husband's insistence on taking Serena to his house every weekend had diminished with unsurprising rapidity. Two days had given way to one, a morning pickup had been pushed back to lunchtime, and now Serena was back on her doorstep barely two hours since she'd left. He never should have been a parent, mused Meryl, slumping back to steam dry as Serena tired of teasing the koi and tried a few cranium-cracking headstands. He'd liked the theory of fatherhood, but the practise tested his mettle, especially since an exotic-sounding person called Lala had begun to appear in Serena's reports on what she did with Daddy. Lala had cooked them a special lunch, and disaster ensued: Serena had screamed and thrown the plate because it burnt her mouth and Daddy hadn't known who to kiss better because Lala was crying. Meryl gathered that he'd chosen Lala, kissing her rather more than better, and dousing his awe-struck daughter with iced Coke. After that it was usually a quick trip to McDonald's, and Serena had been dropped off clutching empty cartons.

Too much reality overwhelmed Daddy, for he was a writer, a word-spinner, creator of fertile fictions about their future life that had entranced Meryl, and withering asides that had cut her to the core. She wouldn't have a word man next time, no, next time, her sweet-scented, velvet-necked lover would be . . . essentially practical, someone who could at least cook, wash up, and share the laundering of Serena's bed-wet sheets. Share Serena. Yes, she needed that. But who? How? She taught in a junior school staffed by women, whose male head was heavily married, his pate as bald as his paunch. One or two lone fathers lined up among the mothers at the school gates, but they were so outnumbered they grabbed their children and scuttled off, pink as crabs.

A salt tang wafted in the sweaty air: Meryl's bungalow was but a pebble's throw from the North Fylde shore, and the tide was in. She could hear the sea's sluggish snore. Overhead, sea-

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gulls wheeled and squealed as if in mockery at her prone figure, marooned on her plastic island in a square, grassy sea. Serena flip-flopped around her, head over heels, coming to a halt at the pond's edge where the koi, thinking the coast was clear, had just nosed out tentative snouts. With a screech she prodded the water, sending them scattering. Meryl's reproof was accompanied by a letterbox rattle, heard through the open patio doors—the sound of the evening paper being shoved through.

"I'll get it, Mummy," declared Serena, leaving the fish poised, gills pumping, not quite trusting the sudden respite—just as Meryl had felt at noon, hearing her breath in the hush when Serena had gone. The newspaper flapped like a great albatross, pages feathering in Serena's swooping arms, to land open on Meryl's face. "Heart-Meet," ran the little subheading directly in front of her left eye. "To contact any of the box numbers, write to . . ." Line after line of lonely hearts advertised their desires. Intrigued, Meryl lifted the crumpled mass and sat up to straighten it out, trying to ignore Serena crouched on the grass at her feet, playing a somewhat painful "This Little Piggy" with her carmine-painted toenails.

That evening, while Serena writhed through her troubled sleep, Meryl thought long and hard about replying to one of the box numbers. The idea appealed—it cut out so much flummery—but she had a sudden image of replica-Meryls lining up at some man's door, acceptance or rejection dependent on his whim. She'd rather be the chooser. Yes—why not order her perfect man, her ideal, her garden-born lover, fresh grown among the roses that afternoon?

She'd studied the style, she knew the shorthand phrases: "Single mum (one daughter, seven), teacher, slim, brunette, early thirties, likes candlelit dinners, beach walks, country pubs WLTM tall, kind, sincere, solvent man, pref. good cook, to share life's pleasures and chores." She read it through twice, then added "N/S" as an afterthought.

Yes, that sounded about right.

On Monday, in the staff room at break time, Meryl showed it to her best friend, Kay. "What's WLTM?" was Kay's blunt response, pronouncing it "wool-tum."

"Would Like To Meet," replied Meryl apprehensively.

"Oh. And N stroke S?"

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"Nonsmoker, of course." Oh dear, if special-needs teacher Kay failed to navigate the initial waters, this was sounding less like a good idea.

"Hadn't you better warn them?" asked down-to-earth Kay. "I mean, about Serena. One daughter, seven—it doesn't exactly convey the full implications of what they'd be taking on, Meryl."

"They'd be taking on me," retorted Meryl, somewhat piqued, but then acknowledged, Kay did have a point. "How about if I add, 'Must have GSOH'? That should cover it."

Kay gazed over her glasses, nonplussed.

"Good Sense of Humour," explained Meryl.

"Well, here's GL to him then, girl," responded her friend, raising her coffee cup in a milky toast. "Good Luck—he'll need it."

"It's me," he said in her ear. He'd crept up behind her, pinched her waist, and made her jump. She'd been so nervous she'd arrived ten minutes early in her prearranged wide-brimmed straw hat, shuffling and glancing up and down the colonnade at the foot of Blackpool Tower. Hot summer crowds milled about her in slovenly shorts and sticky vests, candy colours stained with ice cream, teeth gristled from hot dogs.

She'd regretted the suggestion of meeting under the Tower almost as soon as she'd made it—a more gauche sexual symbol than this vaunting structure would be hard to find—but at the time it had seemed a sensible choice: open-air to avoid being trapped in a bar or car, plenty of taxis for a quick getaway, the beach opposite for a leisurely walk if prospects seemed promising. She hadn't bargained for the full-bellied, silly-headgeared British holidaymaker in such profusion, dawdling along with squawky children—enough to make a celibate's cell infinitely appealing.

So when "It's me" had made her stomach lurch over its Diet-Fast lunch, her dumbstruck face had made him hastily add: "The Pref. good cook, N/S with GSOH."

His friendly, even smile gleamed into her eyes, wanting to reassure her. He was fresh-faced, flat-stomached, lightly tanned, with short receding hair pale and spiky as a nailbrush; his shirtsleeves were rolled up, revealing strong-looking arms, and his collar was unbuttoned, displaying a velvet-skinned softness be-

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low his adam's apple—a cool, inviting hollow. His blue eyes glinted with merriment as she took him in.

He would have been perfect but for one drawback. The top of his head just about reached her shoulder.

"Ah," he said hurriedly, "I know you specified tall, but really in relation to, say, a dandelion, I'm extremely lofty—so as you didn't define your terms, and as I really did want to meet you, here I am—please don't shoo me away, I promise I'm just what you ordered in every other way."

She gave a guilty laugh, for really, how could she spurn him without accusing herself of something foolish like heightism? It had been a silly request anyway. "All right, Mr. Tall-in-relation-to-a-dandelion, what shall we do?"

"First of all," he clicked his heels formally, "a proper introduction—I'm Paul Irons, pleased to meet you—may I call you Meryl?" She nodded as she shook his hand, a hand flexible yet firm enough, felt Meryl, to be more than acquainted with tools and hardware. She'd met only one other respondent, and he'd been a disappointment, a loner mired in despondency, hoping a slim brunette teacher with daughter, seven, would solve all the tangled problems of his life. Paul Irons's smile was sunny enough to snuff out the direst problem, despite being six inches below hers, and yes, Meryl was pleased to meet him. She said so, and full of hope they set off across the road to the beach steps, dodging traffic and trams till they felt the slinky sand under their shoes and, very quickly, under their bare feet.

Meryl let her gauzy dress float in the breeze to reveal a becoming bronze thigh, and Paul opened his shirt just enough to display a light silkening of blond chest hair. They skirted sandcastles and beachballs, avoided deck-chair encampments, ignored scuttering children, and bypassed the donkeys, intent on entertaining each other. Paul's face exuded lightness, his laughter creases pale from lack of sun—yes, Meryl decided, this was what she needed, an optimist, a lifter of spirits, a man who'd make negatives positive and bear her up when Serena weighed her down. What did height matter when one considered all that? Likes, dislikes, family histories, careers, they flashed through Meryl's consciousness till she felt like a drowning woman reliving their dual lives. Paul was not only a "pref. good cook" but a professional one, a *pâtissier,* working at one of the more upmarket bakeries in Lytham St. Anne's, raising delicate pastries and

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cushiony cakes to line the customers' well-padded stomachs. He was thirty-two, a year younger than her, he had been married but it had broken up, and he'd come here six months ago to start afresh—and no, he didn't make a habit of answering lonely hearts ads, Meryl's was the first—"It seemed to leap out yelling, 'Answer me.' "

"Why?"

He laughed. "You wanted me. And I liked the sound of you. Not to mention the daughter, seven—where is she?" He was scuffing his toes through flotsam washed up on the tide line.

Don't do that, Meryl wanted to say as though to a child—you don't know what's tangled in the greasy seaweed and broken shells—plastic shields from panty liners, shrivelled sheathes, rusty nails. But she didn't want to spoil the moment.

"Oh, Serena's with a friend for the afternoon," smiled Meryl, thinking of Kay, the only friend who'd volunteer.

"You should've brought her, I love children," said Paul—scuff, scuff, crunch through the detritus. Oh, don't do that, don't. . . . A Punch and Judy show squawked, and Paul's eyes lit up. Impulsively he grasped her hand, no romantic intertwining, but a pull to join the gaggle of toddlers round the booth. Punch bashed the policeman, Judy tossed the baby, the ghost flew, the children yelled, Paul booed, Meryl cringed, and suddenly her hat was off, spinning through the air—blown by a sudden gust?—no, the wind was gentle, but Paul was grinning, laughing as it spun: "I couldn't resist, it's like a Frisbee."

"That's the way to do it," brayed Punch. "That's the way to do it."

Paul and Serena loved each other from the moment they met. She'd count the hours to his coming and run to hurl herself into his arms, seeking in pockets for his hidden treasures—gifts for her alone. They'd giggle over their secrets, and later, when Meryl least expected it, she'd encounter the newest addition to their hoard—a plastic dog turd, black face soap, sneezing powder—and Serena would screech with laughter as Paul grinned.

At least he could cook, Meryl reminded herself, for on his very first visit he'd insisted on bringing a picnic hamper—all his own work: *bouchées* of wild mushrooms, seafood pilau, cool fronds of salad, and a ziggurat of fine-leafed pastry filled with fleshy fruits on pillows of cream. Meryl was impressed, Serena enchanted,

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and as they unlocked each new offering in the warm evening air, their pleasure was marred only by a seagull dollop in the salad bowl, sending Serena and Paul into spasms of amusement which even infected Meryl.

Oh yes, he was a good cook, and a willing washer-up, he was everything else she'd ordered—except, except—oh, that GSOH. One day he howled with pain over the sink, crying that he'd cut his hand on a broken glass. Meryl stared aghast as the sudsy water bloomed red. She dashed upstairs for the first-aid box, only to return, bandages in hand, to find Paul and Serena doubled up in glee, the glass pristine, his finger intact, and a soapy bottle of Heinz ketchup draining its contents down the plughole.

He created drama only to laugh at it, but he didn't even need to find jokes in wet sheets, for Serena had stopped bed-wetting with his arrival. She'd stopped other things too: writhing and waking shock-faced from fright dreams, all that was gone. Her tantrums lessened, her concentration span grew, she would listen rapt to Paul's stories, and she could even be biddable, his coming a bribe, his absence a threat.

But what of Meryl? Well, when Serena was safely asleep, and Meryl slid her gold-baked body against his, nestling in his flour-dusted arms, burying her nose in his cake-scented hair, and licking sweetness from his skin, she felt desirous and desired. But in the aftermath of love he'd spoil it by nipping her ear with his grinning teeth, or kneading her breast, knocking it down like a mound of dough.

"Don't do that—you're hurting me."

"Sorry, teach."

So she held off from inviting him to stay all night, turning him out in the early hours, making Serena her excuse. But Serena would wake asking for him, disappointed to be alone again with her. Oh yes, Serena loved Paul and his GSOH.

During this time Serena had dutifully been seeing her daddy, not really realising she had any option—it just happened to her, one of life's immutable circumstances. But one evening, Paul suggested a Saturday outing, a treat, to bring back plunder for a mystery feast he'd create. Serena, remembering her appointment with Daddy, burst into tears: "I want to come!"

Paul frowned. "Tell him you're going on a trip with your school," he whispered.

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Meryl protested, "But she isn't, and he has the right to see her." Not to mention my right to see you without my daughter in tow, she thought, but did not mention.

Serena's eyes had widened, and the following day Meryl heard her on the phone to her father, telling him all about the school outing. She snatched the phone away and explained the true situation. "It doesn't matter anyway," responded her ex-husband jadedly, "let her go with Paul, she obviously wants to."

So Meryl had lost, Paul and Serena had won, and her daughter had learned to lie. Thus Meryl was in a grumpy mood all the way in Paul's car as he drove to the fishing port which was his goal.

Down near the docks, Fleetwood's original classical facades had grown raddled with age, like a dowager fallen on hard times. The town's proud trawling trade had dwindled to a trickle, though fish catches still came in on smaller boats. The old dockside gave off a derelict air, its remaining buildings grimy, unloved as an industrial estate. The sunny weather had given way to thick, steamy thunderclouds, casting a further pall over the prospect. Paul had promised the freshest produce of the deep, but this was a far cry from Meryl's rosy-glowed image of buying a sole or two from net-menders sitting on capstans in a picturesque harbour.

Paul drew up in the car park of a rectangular modern block near the old dockside, which overlooked rubble. It was a clinical fish emporium, which he said should have his order.

Meryl got out of the car and was almost floored by the docks' reek—savoury, salty, sour—it was like breathing bouillabaisse. No, she said, feeling tetchy, she wouldn't go in: "You two go."

Serena grasped Paul's hand with saucy possessiveness, swinging on it to pull him forward before he could try and persuade Meryl to enjoy the expedition. They emerged ten minutes later bearing two great carrier bags. Full of pride. Serena parted the handles to reveal the much-heralded mystery dish. It was black-shelled, pincered, feelered—and alive.

"God—Paul, not—not a lobster."

"No," he beamed reassuringly. "Two—a hen for me and a cock for you."

"What about me!" begged Serena, tugging his shirtsleeve.

"You, my little crablet, shall have the tenderest claws from both."

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"Yippee!"

At home, in the kitchen, the creatures flailed their barnacled blue-black pincers helplessly, as if knowing they were condemned. Serena chased them round the floor—Meryl squirmed. "Serena, stop that, they're not mechanical toys. For heaven's sake, do something, Paul. Ugh, they're like giant locusts."

Paul did something: He made a joke of it, calling her squeamish, using the lobsters as puppets, throwing his voice as a crusty sailor and a larky fishwife, delighting Serena, who teased their feelers with a fork.

But when he lifted them onto a chopping board knowledgeably, Meryl felt an awful compulsion to watch, magnetised by her revulsion.

"Feel the weight of that," he said, thrusting the alien thing at her, "they must be heavy and lively, so you know they're fresh." He had adopted a teacherly tone—was he mimicking her? "You shouldn't cook one that's light and lazy—it could be off."

"Are we going to kill them first?" asked Serena, eyes wide, thirsty for knowledge. "How do we do it?"

"Huh-hmmm." The tutor weighed the question. "There are various schools of thought on this. I once worked in a restaurant where the chef simply plunged them straight into boiling salt water."

"But surely that's torture?" quailed Meryl.

"Oh," he scoffed, "if there is any pain, it's over in seconds, the chef said the shock wiped them out straight away. There is an alternative: A friend of mine gets a sharp knife like this"—he selected a large Sabatier from the rack—"and plunges it straight down through here." He held the animal carefully, displaying a crevice behind the head. "That severs the spinal cord, and Bob's your uncle. 'Course, it's best to cover your hand with a towel, in case of spurts."

"Ugggghhhh!" screeched Serena, loving it.

"That's the way to do it," grinned Paul, transformed into Mr. Punch.

"Paul, it all sounds utterly savage. I appreciate you want to give us pleasure—but you'd please me the most if we took them down to the beach right now and let them go."

He balked, getting annoyed, "They were pretty expensive, Meryl."

"I'll pay you whatever they cost."

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"No, Mummy, no, I want to see what Paul does, I want to eat them."

"Look, Meryl, there's really no need for this." A kind of defiance had come into his eyes, an obduracy Meryl had never seen before; he wouldn't be thwarted. "We can rest them in the deep-freeze for a couple of hours."

"Rest them?" repeated Meryl, incredulous.

"That's the most humane way—according to the RSPCA anyway—they quietly fade out from hypothermia, then they're ready to boil. They don't feel a thing."

"How on earth can you know?" begged Meryl weakly.

"Yes, yes, that's the way to do it," begged Serena in Punch-like triumph. "Let's put them to bed on the ice pops."

Meryl, envisioning the pain of frostbitten feet plunged into bubbling water, inwardly swore she'd never touch flesh again; bread and fruit would be her only meat, clean and wholesome and kind.

She should have left them then, or made a scene, grabbed the lobsters (if she could have borne it), and turned Paul out, but how could she when he'd been so good for Serena, whose abiding image of family life was adults at war? And so she stayed, endured the boiling, the twisting off of the claws and legs, the cracking of the shells, the splitting of the body, the disgorging of the flesh, the scooping of the red roe and green liver—"Technically called tomalley, Serena, T-O-M-A-L-L-E-Y." "Toe-maa-lee!" repeated Serena, relishing the strange syllables—yes, Meryl watched the whole carnage of it.

Out of destruction, creation: He melted butter and olive oil, threw in the flesh, and let it sizzle with salt and ground pepper and a dusting of hot cayenne. He swirled brandy in a glass and offered it to Meryl, grinning as he swooped it from her grasp at the last moment to pour in the pan. All the time he gave a commentary in a cod-French accent: "And now—for you, my sesame bun," (light kiss on Serena's nose) *"la pièce de résistance, son et lumière,"*—he set it alight, blue flames leaping, the theatricals enthralling Serena like a seaside show. When the flames died he set the flesh carefully back in its shell. He didn't seem to see the revolt in Meryl's face as he swept up the rest of its juices in a *beurre manié,* smothering the meat in it and finally searing the lot under the hot grill.

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Of course, none of it passed Meryl's lips, she was too busy being sick, but Paul and Serena must have enjoyed their repast well enough. Afterwards she heard them splashing down by the koi pool as she held her head over the cool white bowl.

She was cradling herself between crisp sheets when Paul came. "Wondered if you were feeling better enough for a drop of medicine?"

It was a bottle of black Cahors wine; she drank it to the lees, needing to be numbed. She was pleasantly drowsing when Paul put his head round the door again. "You rest, love, I'll put Serena to bed."

That night, for the first time in weeks, Serena had nightmares. But when she woke the next morning she appeared to have forgotten, asking eagerly, as usual, "Where's Paul, is he still here?"

"No," lied Meryl, and hugged her with a protective passion that quite surprised the child.

Later on, in the first hush after Serena's departure with Daddy, Meryl unlocked the utility room and opened the big chest freezer. Yes, Paul was icing nicely. If there'd been any life left in him he would have gone quietly to sleep, faded out from hypothermia. For she wasn't a cruel woman—oh the smash of the wine bottle on his head after she'd caught him naked, sliding from Serena's bed, that may have hurt, but it would have been brief. For the single thrust from her sharp Sabatier in the back of the neck had severed the spinal cord quite nicely. The towel she'd used to protect against spurts still cushioned him, and he even looked peaceful.

What now? she sighed. Maybe she'd let out a leg or arm to thaw, chop them off, one by one, weekend by weekend, and boil them up in plenty of salty water. She'd eschew the fiddly bits, the butter, cayenne, and *beurre manié,* but perhaps a splash of brandy would mask the smell, and make her feel better. Then he could simply follow her rejected lobster into the garbage. That's the way to do it. Yes, it was an ending Paul himself might have appreciated, with his GSOH.

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Double Take
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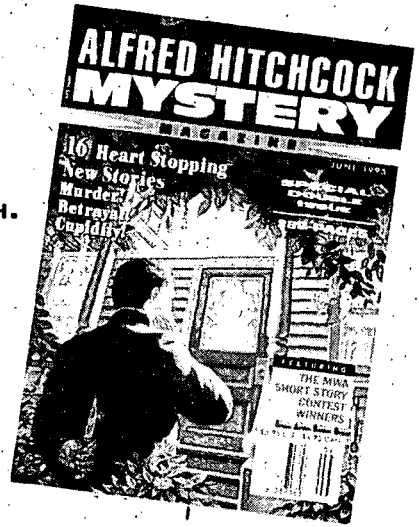

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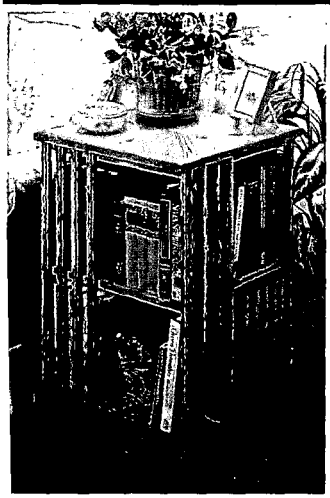

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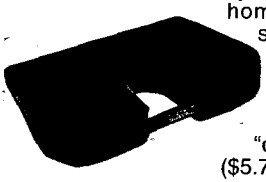

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